

## warming cold hands

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# warming cold hands

by [Drhair76](#)

## Summary

"Are you okay?" Quackity asks through a yawn, noticing Wilbur's folded arms and tense shoulders. "Wil?"

"I'm alright," Wilbur lies.

or, Wilbur learns the difference between SMP and Hypixel, and finally, finally, finds a safe place to rest.

## Notes

I really tried with the hockey this time girl idk, i hope its not terrible

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

SMP are different.

Of course, Wilbur knew that from the first time he met Techno and Schlatt – when his heart was going at a jackrabbit pace and he was hedging backwards into a metal corner ready to do his best to not be beaten into the floor, and Techno pulled *back*.

No one has ever done that before.

Wilbur knows how people work. They're all cool and fun on the outside, but when they get a person under their boot, all of a sudden, even the most *kind* person begins to smile like a shark. If Wilbur is trapped in a corner, then people will keep him there until they deem themselves satisfied.

But Techno didn't. Schlatt didn't.

They stepped back, gave him space to breathe, and gave *him* a choice.

Wilbur's never had that before.

Of course he'd choose SMP. And, now, sitting here on the bench waiting for Phil to come in, he knows that he'd choose them again and again. Whatever beating he needs to take, he will.

"He said Las Vegas," Sapnap is saying, twirling his hockey stick quickly in his hands. "I remember it. Phil said –"

"Wrong," Schlatt argues lazily. He's not even halfway close to being ready for practice, just laying on the ground looking up at the ceiling. If Wilbur scoots over just an inch to the left, their feet will touch.

Wilbur scoots to the right.

"He said Montreal," Schlatt continues. "He was talking about visiting Canada again, Phil always gets excited when we go because we've been so much that it's the only trip he doesn't stress the fuck out about."

Techno, who's skating back and forth and rolling his shoulders, nods. "That's true. Phil seems very calm about this trip."

Wilbur is *not* calm about this trip. It's just his luck that the first two weeks with SMP, they're going out to a tournament. He'd prefer at least another *month* to get used to their play style, if not two. As much time as possible to get used to the way that they function.

As much time as possible before he gets attached to something that he could lose.

Because here's the thing: it's good. What SMP offer him is more than he thinks he's ever been offered. The practices, the group chat, the car rides, the locker rooms. They're always inviting him to things, and talking to him, and telling him that things are *fine, alright, you're good*, even when Wilbur has the distinct feeling that they're *not*.

His coach lingers in his head, and maybe Wilbur's left him, but he doesn't know if the man will ever leave *him*.

*You think that this team really needs you? That this coach is willing to put up with you?*

Wilbur isn't someone who is *loved*, he's tolerated. Wilbur isn't someone who is *coveted*, he's discarded. Wilbur isn't someone who is *wanted*, he's used.

He wonders, every day that he comes into practice, when SMP will figure that out. Hopefully not today and hopefully not in the middle of this tournament – Wilbur is pleasantly surprised when they invite him along -- but he wouldn't be surprised if they *left* him in Montreal or Vegas.

"Canada just makes sense," Schlatt says, finally sitting up. His hair, tied back in a little bun, has sprung loose. He looks silly. If Wilbur was anyone else, he'd laugh. Maybe Schlatt would grin, tease back, reach over to lightly ruffle his hair. Maybe Wilbur would bat his hands away gently and not fear getting elbowed back. Maybe, maybe, maybe. "It feels *right*. Can't you sense it in the air?"

"You talk too much," George reports. Schlatt mocks him.

"What do you think, Wilbur?" Quackity says out of nowhere, and Wilbur startles at being addressed.

"What?" He sounds stricken, but he *is*. *What's the right answer*, he thinks, *which one?* Schlatt's got broader shoulders, but Sapnap's more prone to blinding anger and –

"Don't answer," George informs him. "They're both idiots. Agreeing with either one of them will simply bring you down."

Wilbur's mouth clicks shut as relief passes through him. Casual to everyone else, George gives him a *look*, and then a slight nod.

"We may be idiots," Sapnap starts, but George cuts him off by saying, "you've already lost the argument."

" – but we're *hot*," Sapnap finishes, then leans over the rink edge to fist bump Schlatt. Schlatt shakes his head. Sapnap pouts, then Quackity skates over and pats his shoulder.

"You are hot, Sapnap," and when Sapnap is gaping at him, all flushed, Quackity swipes the puck from under him and dashes off.

"Get up Schlatt," Techno says. Then, kinder, "come on Wilbur. We should warm up before Phil gets here and they descend into arguing yet again."

Wilbur nods and hurries up and onto the ice.

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It turns out that Schlatt was right – it *is* Canada -- so just four days later, they're all on a plane heading to Montreal-Trudeau international airport.

It's cold on the flight, and Wilbur accidentally left his sweater in his overhead bag, and he doesn't want to stand and jostle Techno, who's on his right, so he just –

He just sits there, shivering, blinking ahead. He can't help the tension that locks up his limbs. Techno's slipping into sleep, and his head is leaning and then bouncing back, and Wilbur feels like he should do something, but also maybe if he doesn't move then maybe Techno will just figure it out?

He doesn't know what to do.

Wilbur curls his arms around himself – maybe if he makes himself smaller, Techno will think he isn't there and lean the other way onto Schlatt's shoulder and sleep peacefully. Techno nods again, and briefly, his temple lays on Wilbur's shoulder, and it's so warm and nice. If Wilbur was anyone else, he would lean back and huddle in and lay *his* head atop Techno's.

But he isn't anyone else. He's Wilbur Soot. And he's not made for nice things.

He is a terrible person, so he shifts ever so slightly, making Techno straighten.

"Wil?" The man slurs, blinking. "Are we landing?"

"Not yet," he answers. He digs his frozen fingers into his arms. "You can keep sleeping."

"Hm," Techno hums, and just like Wilbur thought, he tips his head the other way and leans against a snoring Schlatt.

Wilbur stays up and shivers.

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"Look! Look, Phil, there's a Tim Hortons," Quackity says, tugging Sapnap, who is still half asleep, after him in excitement.

"You guys want to grab something?" Phil asks, looking over at Schlatt, who is staring at the bright lights of the Hortons with what is basically an open, drooling expression. "We can stop and eat. As long as we check in before six, we're good."

Wilbur follows as they all crowd around the counter – well, Quackity and Schlatt crowd. Sapnap is being held hostage by Quackity's hand still curled against his forearm. Wilbur's sure the grip isn't that tight, so he figures that there's some *other* reason that the man hasn't pulled away yet.

"I *need* a coffee," Quackity says, and Phil looks wary. "I think I'll die without it, coach."

"That's an exaggeration." Phil squints up at the menu. "Maybe a small. *Small*."

Quackity fumbles for his wallet, letting go of Sapnap, who makes a vague noise of complaint. Ah, Wilbur thinks, that's interesting. "What do you want Sapnap?" Quackity asks. "Let me get you something. They've got an avocado BLT. Techno, do you want something? George?"

Techno waves Quackity off, pulling back his hair.

"What is ...happening?" Wilbur whispers to himself, and George, who Wilbur didn't notice was at his side, suddenly speaks up.

"It makes Q feel good to buy stuff for us." He answers. Wilbur flinches. George pretends not to notice. "Mainly Sarnap for...reasons, but we all try to indulge him when we can."

"Wilbur?" Quackity calls, looking over from where Sarnap is slumped against him and Schlatt is tugging at his sleeve and the person behind the counter is waiting with a confused expression on their face. "Wil, did you want something?"

Wilbur curls a little. "No thank you," he says, making himself look away from the hot chocolate being prepared that would surely chase away the cold creeping up in him. "I'm alright."

Quackity seems displeased, but doesn't push, and Wilbur probably isn't meant to hear the way that George sighs.

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Quackity is vibrating.

The coffee, to put it simply, was a bad idea.

"Sarnap, please let me know if he starts seizing," Phil says warily, checking his phone's GPS, "I can't navigate and keep watch at the same time."

Sarnap, half listening to Quackity's caffeinated babble and half listening to Phil, nods absently. "Uh-huh." Quackity is no doubt over-energized and eager, but Sarnap seems endeared anyway, like he doesn't mind. It interests Wilbur, because Quackity when he's on coffee is the way that he sounds when he's explaining something he's interested in –

Would any of SMP look even half as endeared listening to him speak? Probably not.

Either way, Wilbur just watches silently, swallowing back a smile when Quackity tangles English and Spanish together and Sarnap makes the most *I'm in love* eyes in the history of the world.

The bus ride to the hotel feels long, and then check in feels even longer. By the time they all get their bags up to the fifth floor, Wilbur feels just about ready to fall to the carpet in exhaustion.

"I probably should have done this on the bus," Phil worries, "but listen – there are three rooms for you guys to divide into. Figure out who you're rooming with, and then I'll hand you your card."

Sarnap immediately bundles Quackity close to his chest, and Wilbur would smile if he wasn't feeling so much dread about the fact that he'll be picked last. It's a small thing, but somehow the small things are always the most humiliating. Being picked last for scrimmages, for competitive drills, for team races. No one wants to team with Wilbur, much less share living

space with him. He prepares himself to pretend not to notice when they hurry to pick each other over him.

But, to his shock, all three of them – Techno, George, Schlatt – just look over at him, waiting.

Wilbur blinks. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"We said we don't mind who we room with," Techno says patiently, "so you can pick."

"You should pick me, though," Schlatt says, teasing and light. "I'm the best."

"Keep telling yourself that." George remarks.

"Hey!"

Oh.

"Oh," Wilbur vocalizes. "Oh, um – I don't know–"

"Whatever you choose is fine, Wil," Techno says kindly. "No one will be upset."

Okay, yes, Techno *says* that but–

"Schlatt," Wilbur decides, because Schlatt is the one who wanted to, and while Wilbur can't see the man getting mad over not getting his way, he also can't be one hundred percent sure. He can't really be one hundred percent sure of *anything* anymore.

Schlatt lets out a rowdy cheer and is quickly shushed by all of them, but he waves them off to take the keycards from Phil. Wilbur follows Schlatt inside, curling a hand around his backpack strap and blinking as Schlatt pokes around in every nook and cranny.

"You have to make sure that no one was murdered before you got here," he explains, for some reason opening the *fridge* and checking inside. "Housekeeping may be good, but they aren't *that* good."

Wilbur decides to let him be. He edges further into the room, taking in the carpet and the paintings and the wallpaper. There are two beds side by side, and one is closer to the door while the other is by the air-conditioning unit. Wilbur wants the bed by the door, but he won't put his stuff down until Schlatt does. Just in case.

"Alright," Schlatt huffs. "It seems that they've won this round." He carelessly tosses his bag down by the bed near the air-conditioning, and Wilbur releases a silent breath. "Get all unbuttoned, Soot, it makes me uneasy just looking at you standing there with your shoes on."

Wilbur flushes, then slowly starts unpacking. He puts his converse in the closet, and hangs up his coat. He pulls his suitcase in next to Schlatt's, resisting the urge to keep it right by his bed, within arms reach.

*Calm down*, he thinks to himself, his heart clanging in his chest so loud he's sure Schlatt can hear it, *relax. It's just a hotel room. That's all it is.*

"Do you want the bathroom first?" Schlatt asks. Wilbur just shakes his head. When the man goes by, he hesitates, reaching out to pat Wilbur's shoulder. There are words that he wants to say, Wilbur's sure, but Schlatt doesn't say them, instead continuing on.

Wilbur sinks down into the bed, sighing at how comfortable it is. Sitting curled in a plane seat and then straight on a bus was *not* fun – he lets his limbs loosen slightly, lets himself fall backwards. The tension leaks out of him, and with it, his awareness does too.

He wakes up ten minutes later to a strong hand on his shoulder, and Wilbur yelps, jumping, curling, shielding. When he gets his eyes open, he realizes he's bracing away from *Schlatt*, who's backed up a couple of steps and is watching him with wide eyes and still wet hair.

"Soot," he starts, then swallows, seeming to think better of whatever he was going to say. He averts his eyes. "The bathroom is free."

"Oh," Wilbur says. Schlatt nods awkwardly, tight with a weird energy, but he just moves on, over to his bed, giving Wilbur the space to stand and duck into the bathroom.

Wilbur's embarrassed to say this, but he locks the door. He locks it and it presses his back to it and he sinks to the floor, letting himself tremble. Just in that split second of having a hand on him unexpectedly, he thought of *a lot* of things.

*Keep your head protected, block your airways, make yourself small* – but most importantly, *I knew it.*

Wilbur remembers this one game back with Hypixal.

It started fine, as most of them do. A little jeering and jostling from his teammates, a bit of unchecked excitement, nothing too serious. When they went out there, Wilbur was hopeful – they had scored a goal immediately.

*Maybe*, he thought, smiling, all nervous and small, *they'll win and I won't have to fight.*

Of course, the consequences of Wilbur's optimism came around swinging. The score began tipping in the other team's favor, and one by one his teammates' expressions hardened. It's the tell-tale sign of what's to come.

Wilbur, black and blue, for the benefit of the win. The way that he was made to be.

At half, the locker room was a garden of thorns, and Wilbur shuttered himself away from all the sharp elbows and bared teeth coming his way. Unfortunately he couldn't hide from his coach's gaze, and the way the man pointed out a jersey number just for him.

Vividly, Wilbur remembers that Jared had a sick grin and he nudged Wilbur rough in the back as they left the locker room. Since coach had told him who to provoke, in front of the whole team, they could all taste blood in the water. Their aggression and anger had shifted to anticipation. All of Hypixal were excited to see Wilbur fight.



All of Hypixal were excited to see Wilbur go down.

And go down he did. He got two hits in before the other player's *anger* kicked in and knocked him flat on his ass. Once Wilbur was down, and winded, it still didn't stop, because he was foolish enough to leave his front unprotected. Knuckles rained down, and it was only when the body was hauled off of him that he was allowed to properly curl and shake apart.

He got himself up before anyone called the athletic therapist over, and locked himself in the penalty box. He tried to feel safe with the walls of plexiglass around him, but his teammates' jeers and their opponents' glares made him feel trapped in place.

It only checks out that later, when the game is over and they've only just scrapped by with the win, he's run up on.

Wilbur was just *resting* for a moment – he had pulled his aching body through the shower and shoved all his gear into his bag, and was, as he always was, left alone in the locker room to fend for himself. He just needed a *second* to close his eyes and lean back against the cool metal and let all the tension ease out of his limbs. He just needed *one*.

Of course he didn't get it.

The locker room door opened so hard it knocked back against the wall, jerking Wilbur to awareness – even still, before he had the chance to scramble up to see what's coming, a fist was curling in his sweatshirt and hauling him up and *slamming* him back against the metal.

Wilbur yelped, chest heaving, eyes blowing wide. The guy from the game – broad chested, thick armed, *angry* – was pinning him to the door, and the locker slates and locks were pressing into his back painfully.

And Wilbur had *no idea why*.

"You think you can just *ruin* my game by trying to start a fight you can't finish?" He asked. Wilbur whined, trying to get a breath in.

"Please," he whispered, shaking, "please, I didn't– they made me, they made me –"

The man's grip loosened, then tightened, slamming Wilbur back again, dazing him, shutting him up.

" *They made you, huh?* Sure – you know what, if you're so desperate for a fight you can't win that you're willing to *lie* for it, then how about this?" The hand tightened further and Wilbur choked. The man grinned sadistically. "I'll *give* you a fight you can't win. And you'll be *grateful*."

Wilbur doesn't remember the rest of that night. There are snatches – a fist knocking his head to the side, a foot to his gut, curling and curling and curling, begging. He remembers that the floor was cold and the metal was sharp and that when it was over it was *late*. He remembers his own eyes fluttering shut, only to be again startled awake by a harsh laugh.

He remembers panicking, thinking the man came back for him, only to see Jacks leaning against the doorway, grinning. Still there, even at the hour.

"You just never learn, do you Soot?" He asked, amused. "They're all coming for you, man. At least open your eyes to see them."

Wilbur, now months and months away, a whole *country* away, can't let it go. He's *locked himself in a bathroom* because he can't let it go. Schlatt is probably confused, weirded out, regretting rooming with him because of this. Because of the way he is.

"Pull yourself together," Wilbur whispers to himself, tugging his hands through his hair. "Breathe. He's not gonna – he won't –"

Wilbur can't make himself finish the sentence. His mouth won't form the words. He huffs, shaky and upset.

"Fuck," he says, then pulls himself to his feet. "Just – be *normal*."

He pulls his fraying pieces back together, hops in the shower, and puts new sweats. When he comes out of the bathroom, Schlatt is still awake, absently flipping through the TV channels. He looks over at Wilbur, taking in his still damp hair and red-rimmed eyes.

"Hey," he says, television forgotten, "hey, Soot, you alright?"

"Fine," Wilbur says tight with nerves, "Good. Just– gonna sleep. If – if that's alright?"

Schlatt shuts off the TV, his shoulders shuffling nervously. "Yeah. Do you – is it too cold? Or hot? Do you want some – uh, I think there are blankets in the closet –"

"I'm alright, thank you," Wilbur settles into bed, pulling his covers up over his chest. This, he decides, is awful. He doesn't want Schlatt to feel... *responsible* for him, just because Wilbur can't be woken up like a normal person. "Goodnight."

Hesitantly, Schlatt says goodnight back, and the lights flicker off.

Wilbur doesn't close his eyes. He lays there, gaze on the ceiling, tension hovering in his bones. Eventually Schlatt starts to rumble like a tired train, and still Wilbur can't relax.

*They're all coming for you, man*, Jacks had said, *at least keep your eyes open to see them*.

Wilbur, not one to repeat painful mistakes, keeps his eyes open.

Just in case.

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The effects of Wilbur's lack of sleep don't make themselves known the next day. He's still brimming with nervous energy. It's game day, so he can't be worried about whatever happened last night.

Quackity, too, is feeling all the nerves.

He paces back and forth next to their table, a muffin in one hand and an apple in the other, just walking and walking and walking. “Do we know who the first team is? What they’re called?”

“Finished,” Schlatt says lazily, “because we’re gonna end them, Q. Easy.”

“You are not helpful,” Quackity says.

“They’re called the vortex, okay?” Techno eases, “hey, Quackity, how about you drink some water?”

“And breathe,” George remarks, eyeing him closely.

Quackity inhales, holds it until his cheeks go red, and then lets it out in one long slow breath. He clumsily sits down at Techno’s side, and Techno pats his shoulder gently. Wilbur eyes the hand with what’s probably far too much interest.

“Sorry. Nervous.” Quackity says.

“Don’t be sorry,” Techno nudges a water over to Quackity. Quackity releases the death hold he has on his apple to take it. “You’re alright. I’m sure we’re all a bit nervous.”

“Speak for yourself,” Schlatt remarks. George looks at him, blank. Schlatt cowers instantly, quieting.

“The first game is always nerve-wracking,” Techno continues like nothing even happened, still rubbing Quackity’s shoulder. It seems to be helping, because Quackity’s cracked open the water and isn’t red anymore. “Everything is daunting. But, I promise, the second that you get out onto the ice, you’ll remember why you’re there and you’ll know exactly what you need to do. And besides, we’re all right there with you. We’ve got your back.”

Quackity swallows, and smiles, and Wilbur watches as Techno’s hand leaves him. He pretends that he isn’t imagining Techno soothing over his own worries like that.

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Here's the worst thing about Hypixal: they had their moments of good.

No person can be bad all the time. Wilbur likes to think that if they didn’t have these moments of kindness – or, of not-awfulness – then he would’ve left. He wants to say that if he was constantly being berated or kicked to the side, or if he thought that his teammates weren’t capable of nicety, then he would leave. He wants to say that he has enough self respect to leave if it was like that.

He knows that wouldn’t be true.

But it doesn’t matter – not really – because they weren’t always awful. When they were in a good mood, they were kind. Richard, in particular, would throw out absent compliments, and Wilbur would cling to them for the rest of the day, swelling up with happiness at the slightest thing.

And they weren't unkind with each other, either, which, in hindsight, maybe made it all hurt worse.

Why, he would think, does Jared give Jacks a friendly clap on the shoulder when he scores a goal, but nudges Wilbur harshly in the side when Wilbur does it? Why, he would think, does Daniel cheer loudly when Jacks gets to the rink, but roll his eyes when Wilbur does?

Maybe, he would think, there's something wrong with me.

Even after games – right after the game winning shot -- when they're all collapsing onto each other, cheerful and loud and happy, Wilbur would go over, because *he's a part of the team, right? He wears the jersey and goes to the practices and works just like the rest of them. He's been on the ice all game and – and this win is just as much his as it is theirs, so he would celebrate it, right?* He would go over, a shaky grin on, drifting on the outskirts of their joy, looking for a way to take part.

It was a shock when he was nudged away sharply. The elbow digging into his side hurt, yeah, but it was nothing compared to his heart. It felt as if that sharp limb had dug right in the vulnerable muscle, bruising it.

The message was clear: he wasn't welcome into their happiness and he wasn't deserving of their kindness.

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Sometimes the rink feels like one huge box.

The crowd is all around, surrounding you, and everywhere you look there's someone yelling something, wanting something, pushing you to do something. There's no top to the rink, but irrationally Wilbur feels like there's a ceiling pressing him in, flattening him down to fit inside. Wilbur's always felt shoved inside a tight space when he's on the ice. Even SMP can't change that.

“Alright, do we all know the plan?” Techno calls.

Various yes's ring out, and Wilbur takes a deep breath.

*Focus*, he thinks, *game mode*.

SMP's play style is nothing like Hypixel's.

For one, they don't try *bullying* the opposing team into losing. They actually play. It feels weird to step out onto the ice and actually get the chance to think critically about the game that Wilbur loves and enjoys, but he's getting used to it. And that's honestly one of the problems that he's having.

He's getting *used* to SMP. He's settling in, he's learning them all. He's enjoying what they're doing for him.

How long can it last? Realistically, how long can he stay asleep in this dream?

The other thing is the way that they get up the ice. They don't just hoard the puck and try to break to the goal and score on their own. Wilbur remembers many games where Jacks in particular would wrestle the puck away and try to muscle his way up the ice on his own. He boasted about being a *one man show*, someone that *didn't even need teammates to win*.

On SMP, they find each other on the ice like it's second nature.

*I can't really explain it*, Sapnap had said once when Wilbur asked, *it's like – I can just feel that they're there. I just know where they'll be, and I know that they're waiting and I know that they're not gonna let me down, you know? If you can tell me the word for that then I'm all ears, Wilbur.*

Wilbur doesn't know. He can't really say that he's ever experienced anything like it before. But he loves watching it happen and he loves to pretend that he's a part of it.

Normally these two things work wonders. Phil and Techno draft up a plan that doesn't rely on thrusting shoulders and slipping sticks low enough to *maybe* trip someone, and then Quackity handles the puck with cat-like quickness, passing it to Sapnap, who knows how to snap-shot like no one's business.

Normally.

Tonight it's hard-going. By half-time, the puck's been in the defensive zone more than anywhere else, Wilbur's got sweat-soaked hair plastered to his forehead, and an aching back. When they all file into the locker room, Wilbur's just – *tired*. His head hurts, really, and he doesn't want to fight. Maybe it's selfish, because he knows that this game is trending downward and he could really *help*, but – fuck if he doesn't want to keep himself uninjured the way he has been recently.

"Alright," Phil says, and Wilbur winces, bracing. "This isn't working. Doesn't need to be said, I know, you all can see the scoreboard. You all can *feel* the points out there. I know you're taking home every single one of those missed shots, Sapnap. I know all those pucks going by are riding the bus with you, Tech. I know every time you're late to cutting off a pass, you're putting it on your shoulder, George. I know. This game travels. But listen to me when I say this – forget about those missed shots and goals. Forget about those times you showed up late or blundered something easy. Forget about what you did wrong in this half. Let's focus on what we did *right*, and then *let's do it again*."

Wilbur blinks.

Then, weirdly, Phil looks at Schlatt. "Schlatt?"

Schlatt's eyes cut up, then right back down. He seems a little embarrassed when he speaks but – "Number 27: he's shaky with his left. I pressed that way once and shot by him. Found Sapnap waiting for me."

"Good. Great observation." Phil's eyes slide over. "Quackity?"

"I gotta start changing up my speed," he says, biting his lip. "I can't have just one dial. That one goal we got was because I assisted off a delay. Thankfully Sapnap read me –"

"Always," Sapnap cuts in easily, and Q nods.

"So if we keep it up, then that should be good."

Phil nods approvingly. "Nice job. I like what I'm hearing – Techno?"

And they all go around like that. Each one of them, saying something that they've noticed that worked out. And not just that, but something that they did that directly affected the game positively. Something they did that was *good*.

"Wilbur?" Phil goes, and Wilbur blinks, gaping. Phil's ever-patient though, even if they're running low on time to talk. "Wil, what's something that you've noticed out there. Something that has or could help us in the second half of this fight?"

Wilbur hesitates, licking his lips.

He's noticed a lot. He's noticed that the player facing him, number three, leans heavy to the right, indicating that he's got a weaker left side. He's noticed that number three's got a solid grip on his stick, meaning that when he hits, he curls his fist tight. He's noticed that the man isn't *as* steady on the skates at Wilbur is – that if it came down to it and Wilbur was really desperate, then he could throw the man off balance just long enough to get his bearings.

It's his job to notice these things, so of course he has. But – Techno said that Vortex likes to blindside him by faking him out, and that when he trusts his *gut* instead of his *eyes*, he blocks shots. And George said that they move in a weave pattern, and as long as he keeps track of the motion, he can cut into it.

The things that Wilbur's seen doesn't sound like the things his team have.

"Come on Wilbur," Phil encourages. "You know hockey. Analyze your game play. Tell me where you're going right."

And, as if unlocking a secret vault from inside him, Wilbur's mouth opens, and words he didn't even know he had come spilling out. "George is right – they've got patterns. They're– they move like a team that run the same play over and over and over again in practice. And it's really good. But they're weakest with snap-shots. They fumble when their plan doesn't work right the first time. When they go to clear it, we – we should fight. We need to challenge them for the puck harder. They'll give."

Phil's eyebrows raise, and a weird silence descends over the locker room. Wilbur itches to take his words back, to apologize for them, to say *sorry coach, I don't know what the hell I'm talking about*, but– well, Techno said his piece with his head tall. And so did Sapnap. Why shouldn't he?

"That is an outstanding observation, Wilbur," Phil says finally, and Wilbur resists the urge to exhale so hard his body bends. "Really, just – astute. Truly." Phil turns, opening his arms.

"See? You all *know* this game. You haven't become worse players since this morning, and this shitty half doesn't make you up. So, how about we go out there and do what we know works and leave everything else behind? Does that sound good to everyone?"

SMP cheers, and Wilbur lets himself laugh a bit, tired but also astonished, with something indefinable and warm rolling through him.

---

They win, and the only time that Wilbur has to fight is when wrestling the puck away from number three as he clears it.

---

"Someone looks fucking exhausted, huh?" Sapnap says, leaning over and squinting at Wilbur, who's sitting cross legged on the locker room floor.

SMP are all around, pulling off gear, chucking water back and forth, laughing in that pleased post-win way about how bleak everything looked not forty minutes ago. Wilbur isn't going to kid himself and say that he'd join in if he wasn't, as Sapnap so delicately put it, *fucking exhausted*, because he knows he wouldn't, but still.

"Big game," Wilbur manages. Sapnap straightens, flipping his head-band-less hair out of his eyes.

"Yeah, and you played fantastic." He reaches down, offering his hands. Wilbur blinks at them like they're foreign objects. Sapnap isn't perturbed. He just kneels down and takes Wilbur's wrists, carefully helping to unstrap the gloves that are still there. The move is gentle and sweet and – and touching, really. Wilbur wonders what he's done to deserve this. "If you hadn't noticed that clearing thing, Wil, I don't think I would've scored half the goals I did in the second half. Seriously."

Wilbur feels like the proper response is to smile and accept the compliment, but he just feels overwhelmed.

"Oh."

Sapnap doesn't seem to mind. And when the gloves are off, he curls warm hands over Wilbur's, clasping tight once before pulling back and stepping over to where Quackity is laying on the floor like a starfish.

Wilbur swears he can still feel Sapnap's palm lines against the backs of his hands even hours later.

---

They have one more game for the day, and it's much, *much* easier than their first. Unfortunately, everything feels the same to Wilbur's tired limbs, so he's pretty much falling asleep afterwards. If there was a third game, Wilbur doesn't know if he'd even manage to make it ten minutes in.

He tucks himself in the back of the bus when they all file on, and he's left generally to his own devices with the way that Sapnap and Schlatt start bickering closer to the front of the bus. Even with his eyes sliding shut, Wilbur can tell that they're successfully driving Technoblade up a wall.

He nods off for a bit, but the rest isn't *restful*. He jolts awake at every bump or stop, and his eyes flutter open, catching the image of Quackity, just a bit ahead of him.

Quackity seems similarly tired – draped in Sapnap's jacket and layed out over the seats – he *is* sleeping, pretty much. Comfortable and easy, like it's nothing.

Wilbur tortures himself by watching, and then tortures himself some more by watching the way that Sapnap easily slips Quackity onto his back to carry him inside when the bus stops.

He trails behind, shivering slightly, watching Q tuck his face into the back of Sapnap's neck and breathe.

Phil gets them a table big enough to seat them all, and Wilbur tries not to sway as he slides in next to Techno and Quackity. He holds himself as tightly as he can, so he doesn't spill into their space, desperately seeking a place to rest.

"Are you okay?" Quackity asks through a yawn, noticing Wilbur's folded arms and tense shoulders. "Wil?"

"I'm alright," Wilbur lies.

Quackity squints at him, his nose wrinkling rather adorably. Wilbur figures that he'll just take it though, and turn and leave Wilbur be, but he doesn't.

"Well, you know what? I'm *not* fine," he huffs. Wilbur startles.

"What?" Wilbur goes. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"They have mozzarella sticks here," Quackity says grumpily. "And my *problem* with mozzarella sticks is that I like them too much to not get them, but I don't like them *enough* to eat a whole basket on my own. And *someone* here doesn't like to split them with me."

Sapnap, on Quackity's other side, simply pats Q's shoulder affectionately without breaking stride in his own conversation, as if he's got one ear tuned into whatever Quackity is saying at all times. Quackity rolls his eyes, but it's with this pleased little smile that isn't enough to fool Wilbur at all.

"Oh," Wilbur says seriously. "Oh, I see." He hesitates, then goes, "well, maybe we could split it then – if you needed–"

"Yes!" Quackity beams. "That's perfect. Thanks Wilbur!"

Wilbur settles a little, uncurling.



He spends the rest of dinner half-eating mozzarella sticks and half-listening to Quackity's sleepy chatter. He notices the way their knees tap under the table, but - well, if Quackity doesn't mind then neither does he.

---

The first thing Phil does when they get back home is cancel practice.

Wilbur worries at first, maybe they didn't do as well as they were supposed to – even though they *won* all the matches they played – and maybe it was his fault – even though it's a *team* of people on the ice and not just him – but no. *Rest*, Phil tells them, *together, by yourselves, whatever works best for you. Just please rest and we'll get back to work soon.*

Sapnap doesn't seem to want to rest. At least, not in the traditional sense.

"Sleepover at mine," he crows, jumping up to hook an arm around George's shoulder. George twists easily and shoves him off. It's a violent movement, but the push is light and Sapnap hardly even breaks stride, and Wilbur blinks in awe. "I'm buying snacks."

"Chips ahoy," Quackity says, sidling up into George's vacated spot under Sapnap's arm.

"Yes sir," Sapnap says.

"And Cheez-its."

"Obviously."

"And microwave waffles."

"Naturally."

"How about some *fruit*?" Techno asks, voice bland, eyebrow up. Sapnap sticks a tongue out at him, but he promises to buy some grapes or kiwis or *something*.

"That *or something* is very promising," Techno sighs, "thanks Sapnap."

"No problem, Tech!" He says cheerily, then tugs Quackity closer. "Okay so Q's coming –"

"I never said that," he teases even as he lets himself be squished close.

"Uh – you're *coming over*," Sapnap says, and Quackity snorts fondly. "Who else? George? Hey buddy – *hey* – wanna come over? I'll make you some coffee."

George shoots Sapnap the world's most withering glare. Sapnap's smile widened. George stops glaring to sigh like Sapnap has ruined his life. "Whatever. I'll be over later."

"Yes!" He cheers. "Schlatt? What say you, big guy?"

"Get sour cream and onion chips and I'll think about it." Schlatt sighs. "I gotta head home and take a shower. Soot, do you want a ride?"

Wilbur jolts. "Uh – no thanks. I'm alright. I'm just gonna go home and – you know." He doesn't really finish the sentence other than shrugging. He doesn't have plans. Go home. Sleep. Maybe eat something. Wait until the next practice or game or whatever. It's what he usually does. He'll call Shubble and James and pretend that he can't physically *feel* his teammates meeting without him, hanging out without him, being friends while he's on the outside.

Sapnap frowns. "Are you not coming over?" And the way he says it – he sounds genuinely hurt. Upset by the idea that Wilbur would be by himself when he could be with them.

"Oh, I thought –" Wilbur's eyes cut over to Schlatt, who looks puzzled, and then Techno, who's frowning. "Oh. Uh – sure." He finishes weakly. "What time?"

Sapnap grins, the hurt look filtering away. "As soon as you're changed, Wil. Just come over – the door is always open."

---

Wilbur waits a little before he goes over.

He kind of — panics. He's had a few sleepovers in his life. There were all of Shubble's study dates that went on too late for him and James to go home. She had them drilling SAT flashcards until eleven and then they'd pass out on her bedroom floor only to wake up in the morning, heads swimming with words like *dearth* and *prestidigitation*. Or, on rare occasion, James pulling them both to a bookstore at six, waiting for a new release. The line would be all the way down the block and James would be armed with blankets and a full on tent to stay the night.

Wilbur hosted sometimes, but more often, it was them coming over after practices, Shubble with band-aids and James with movies, and sitting pressed close on the couch, so that when Wilbur fell asleep, he knew he wasn't alone.

That was the extent of Wilbur's experience with sleepovers. So this? This organized team bonding time? Wilbur had no fucking clue what to expect. It made him tight in the chest just to think about.

He goes in sweats, and brings a bag of overnight stuff, and a box of Cheez-its, because *Wiki-how* said to bring snacks. He's decidedly ignoring the part of the article that instructed him to bring alcohol or a *rousing, party-starting personality*. He's sure the article is aimed at someone with an *I'm the center of attention* mindset and Wilbur is simply not that person.

He stands outside the front door for a little bit just – breathing. Really, just breathing. He's anxious and it sucks. It's just a door, he tries to tell himself. It's just a door. But his brain can't let it go. He's tight as a pulled string and it feels like he's about to go to war, when it's *just a door*. It's just a sleepover, he wants to whine, why is he so fucked up?

"Wilbur?"

Wilbur startles, spinning to see Techno standing there on the stoop behind him, pajamas on and a rolled up blanket under his arm. "Wil, are you alright?"

“I’m – I’m not supposed to be here,” he blurts, because for some reason he just can’t keep things to himself around Technoblade.

Techno’s brow wrinkles, concern creasing his face. Then it clears, being replaced by a light hearted smile. “Nonsense, Wilbur – this is Sapnap’s house, of course you’re supposed to be here. Here –” He leans around Wilbur and taps his fingers to the doorbell.

There’s a muffled shout from inside, and then the door is opening to show Sapnap’s excited expression. “Oh my God, you guys are so fucking late – let’s go, let’s go, we’re trying to decide what pizza to order and you have to help me convince George to get meat-lovers when he comes.” And then he disappears into the house, leaving the door cracked for them. Wilbur stares, overwhelmed and almost paralyzed, but it’s okay, because Techno chuckles warmly and puts a hand on the small of Wilbur’s back to gently nudge him inside.

Wilbur takes off his shoes and follows Techno down the hall and into the living room. Quackity is there, standing in the middle of the room with his confused eyes on the television set and a remote in his hands.

“No,” he’s saying, “I already went to input, I’m –”

“Try it again,” Schlatt instructs lazily, leaning back on the couch behind him, a bag of sour cream and onion chips on his lap. “Maybe you missed it.”

Quackity whirls around, eyes narrow. He, in a move that Wilbur wouldn’t have seen coming, throws the remote at Schlatt’s face. “You go to input!” He stalks over and plops down at Schlatt’s side, snatching the bag of chips off his lap. “I’m going to eat these.”

Schlatt doesn’t even bother arguing. He looks resigned as Quackity steals his chips and leans into all his space. He notices them standing there though, and a smile breaks out over his face.

“Soot! Soot, come here, come here and help me with this TV – Sapnap’s too cheap to get a good one that actually *works*. ”

From around the corner in what Wilbur assumes is the kitchen, comes Sapnap’s voice. “ *Says the man whose truck breaks down every four seconds because he refuses to get a new one!* ”

“Hey –” Schlatt says. “Jambo is a beauty. I can’t throw her out.”

“Here, give me that,” Techno reaches out and takes the remote, stepping over to the screen to fix the tv. Wilbur follows instructions and sits down gingerly at Schlatt’s other side. It’s nothing compared to Quackity, who’s leeching all of Schlatt’s warmth away, but Schlatt still smiles like Wilbur did something right.

“I brought Cheez-its,” he says because he doesn’t know what else to say.

Schlatt blinks, then his grin widens. “Oh Soot, you are heaven-sent. Crack them open right now.”

---

When George shows up, the sleepover is well on its way – at least, Wilbur hopes so, because it's only nine and he can feel himself lagging.

They argued for almost a half an hour about the pizza they were gonna order – Sapnap and Schlatt were team meat-lovers and Quackity and Techno were team cheese. Wilbur is ninety five percent sure that George would have rather eaten real leaves off the trees outside, but he conceded to a pepperoni pizza as a compromise.

Secretly, Wilbur would have probably advocated for Hawaiian, but the last thing he wanted to do was overstep, so he just – stayed quiet.

After they place the order, they finally get the TV to work, and Sapnap brings out bowls of pretzels and cheetos and tortilla chips with salsa. He helps Techno connect game controllers and then queues up a ton of games that Wilbur's never even *heard* of before. He made the decision to sit out and just watch as Sapnap and George try to beat each other in *injustice*. But –

“Play me next, Soot,” Schlatt asks, and Wilbur winces.

“I don’t know how.” He admits when Schlatt's brows furrow. “I’ve never been a big video game player.”

Schlatt seems unbothered. “Well, don’t worry. I’ll show you how. And I’ll show you the wonders of NHL 21 and how to trash-talk your way to virtual victory.”

Wilbur wants to protest, because he doesn’t want to disappoint Schlatt with how bad he’ll be, but before he can even open his mouth, the man is sliding a controller into his hands and directing him on picking a character. Wilbur manages to pick Hawkgirl, and Schlatt picks Bane, and it looks like Wilbur is going to get *crushed* and that he'll have to just laugh light-heartedly as he inwardly flushes in embarrassment, but no.

Schlatt leans over and lays his hands over Wilbur's fingers.

"Look – this is how you jab with her mace, and this is how you swing and this is how you kick to the sky." Schlatt is gentle as he directs Wilbur, and even when he is applying pressure to get him to press a button, it's painless and slow. The weight is – *nice*, honestly. It's really nice. Wilbur, if he were allowed, would curl his fingers into Schlatt's anytime. "You've got combo attacks too – wanna learn those?"

Wilbur finds himself nodding, even though he isn't *really* taking in any of what Schlatt is saying. The touch is pleasant, and that's good enough for him.

---

(Wilbur loses, but when he manages to finally make Hawkgirl pick Bane up and toss him across the screen, they all cheer like he's won, and Wilbur can't stop smiling for the rest of the rounds.)

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After they eat, George is the first one asleep, claiming the living room armchair and Sapnap's best knitted throw.

Sapnap, as much as he denies it, loves George— *clearly* — because he settles them all down and starts directing them to places to sleep. Besides, they're all *actually* tired from the trip. Maybe not as much as Wilbur, but—

"Here, Wil," Sapnap lays a blanket around Wilbur's shoulders. "You can take the couch."

"Oh. Then where will Quackity sleep?"

For Sapnap's sake, Wilbur pretends not to see the way he flushes. "Uh — Q can sleep with me. I mean — like, in my room. Like, we can share the bed. We normally do when we travel anyway. *Rooms*, that is. We share rooms. That's —"

"Uh huh," Schlatt goes as he walks by. "Glass is actually *jealous* of how transparent you two are. Seriously. It's embarrassing."

Sapnap spins to argue with him, leaving Wilbur to settle back onto the couch. Techno, flattening a thick blanket against the rug, watches him.

"Everything alright, Wil?"

Wilbur curls his hands into the blanket. "Yes," he says, trying to will it so. He wants to believe that tonight will be the night that he manages sleep, but he knows better. He wants to believe that the presence of his team around him would be enough to chase off fear, that tonight being more fun than he's ever had in a long time would help, but—

"Goodnight, Techno," he whispers, pulling the blanket around himself.

Techno seems hesitant when he speaks. "Goodnight, Wilbur."

---

When he's dropped his stick *three* times in the span of an hour, Phil blows his whistle.

It's embarrassing, the way that he calls for a water break, but motions for Wilbur to come over, because Wilbur *knows* it's his fault that they're going slower than usual and taking more time in between drills and it fucking *sucks*. It's just — he can't think straight. His hands are shaky and his eyes sting and his head throbs like that feeling he gets when one of his flat neighbors a few doors down plays a song with a lot of bass in it.

It's the sleep thing, and he knows it's the sleep thing, but he can't do anything about it. There's just — there's something hanging over his head, over his bare throat, that makes it hard for him to rest. And whatever it is is creeping its way into other aspects of Wilbur's life and *ruining* them.

"Wilbur," Phil starts, with such a gentle tone that Wilbur wants to sink into it. "Hey, are you okay? You seem — distant today. Do you need some time off? You can sit on the side if —"

“No,” Wilbur blurts. “No, I’m okay. I promise. I can practice.” Phil’s expression doesn’t change, and Wilbur fears that the man will make him sit out, which will in turn make SMP upset that he’s resting and they’re not, and then he’ll have to pay for that and – “It’s just a headache,” he explains. “Nothing too serious. I can still play.”

“Alright, I’m trusting you to know your own limits. If you need a second to get some water or you need to sit out, then just let me know, okay?”

Wilbur nods, and because of that his head throbs, and really, that sums it all up.

Phil pushes him to get some water, and then they’re back to practicing.

It’s business as normal – Sappap striking up some friendly competition between himself and Schlatt, and the two of them bumping back and forth like rambunctious puppies. It’s a lot of fun to watch – not so much fun to be a part of unexpectedly. At least, that’s what Wilbur’s thinking when he, slow getting the discarded puck from his own turn, is slammed in the back by a skidding Schlatt.

Being hit so suddenly makes his head jerk, and it only worsens when he smacks against the wall of the rink and crumples to his knees.

Everything rings for a moment, and his eyes, squeezed shut, block out all the light, so when the first hand curls around his bicep, he flinches back, startled. He opens his eyes though, and catches sight of Schlatt’s horrified and guilt-ridden expression.

“Fuck, Soot,” he’s saying, “fucking – oh shit – I couldn’t stop in time, man, are you – here, don’t move, don’t –”

“M’ fine,” Wilbur tries, blinking through his swimming vision. He feels like tilting over and curling up on the ice. Getting up is so much work for his lead limbs. “I’m okay. Schlatt.”

Schlatt keeps his hands to himself, obviously turned away by Wilbur’s flinch. Phil skates over, and Schlatt scoots backwards, falling away, and maybe it makes no sense, but Wilbur mourns his closeness – something about Schlatt in his space feels like nothing.

Phil kneels, and squints at Wilbur’s eyes. “Wilbur...that hit didn’t look too bad, but you understand what I have to do now, don’t you?”

Wilbur swallows down guilt. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. I’m sorry, coach.”

Phil reaches out slowly and puts a hand on Wilbur’s cheek. It’s there for a breath before it flutters to his shoulder and then pulls back completely. “Don’t apologize. We’re all just making sure you’re okay.”

Wilbur nods, a spike of pain making him wince.

“Alright, come on now – let me help you up,” Phil stands and reaches down and Wilbur carefully curls his hands into Phil’s. He’s pulled up smoothly, and from his new vantage point he can see SMP all watching, crowded close. None more than Schlatt, who’s brow is still wrinkled something awful. “There we go. Nothing hurts too badly, right?”

Wilbur murmurs a no, unable to get over the gentleness with how he's being treated – the worry that they're giving to him, of all people. "It was just a bump," he says. "I've – I've had worse."

Schlatt's expression shutters and Phil's calming smile tightens. "Well, not anymore. Come on boys, I'm calling practice for the day."

Phil pulls away, and Wilbur follows, getting off the ice and sitting down at the bench to take his skates off. SMP all follow suit around him, and it doesn't escape Wilbur's notice that Schlatt keeps as far away from him as he can. George, however, doesn't seem to share the same sentiment, because the man sits next to him like that spot has his name on it.

Wilbur wonders if he's supposed to say something, but then –

"I don't like hugs. So when you answer, please keep that in mind, but...are you alright?" George asks.

That last part is so sudden and quiet and the way that George doesn't even look over from where his gaze is trained ahead that Wilbur thinks that he hallucinated it for a second. But when Wilbur doesn't answer, George looks over, his expression gentle.

*No, Wilbur wants to say. No, I'm not. My head hurts and my eyes sting and I feel too small for my body, and too small for this team. No, I'm not, because I'm ruining you all. I'm staining this beautiful gift that I've been given by nothing more than just being myself. No.*

"Yeah," Wilbur blurts. "Yeah, of course I'm – yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

And clearly that was too much considering Wilbur just got knocked into a wall by a skater that has over fifty pounds on him, but George takes it in stride and simply shrugs. "It's all a lot, I bet. A lot to adjust to. No one would be upset if you were overwhelmed."

"I know," Wilbur says. "I know that."

"Do you?"

Wilbur presses his lips together. He looks away. George doesn't ask again.

---

"I'm ruining it," Wilbur says, and what he gets back through the phone's receiver is Shubble's tired sigh.

"Wilbur," she says, calm and patient even though he knows it's late for her, a perpetual morning person. "You aren't ruining anything. You *can't* ruin anything."

"I could," he argues. "I could ruin a lot."

"Okay," she amends. "You *could*. But you haven't. And you won't. Wilbur, you want this, I know that you do. What you need to do now is let yourself have it."

Wilbur squints up at his dark ceiling. His vision is blurry, but only a little, so it's fine. Really, it's nothing. "Did James tell you to say that?"

"James doesn't tell me to do anything," she huffs. Then she pauses. "Okay, maybe he's said it to me before, but Wilbur, that's not the *point*. The point is that – and don't tell him I said this, because he'll never shut up about it if you do– but he's *right*. He's right. You need to just let yourself have what they're giving you. *Grab back when they reach*."

"Shubble," he says, painfully vulnerable, "what if I grab too much? What if they stop offering?"

"You've got to trust that they won't. You've got to trust that they'll stay."

---

Wilbur is cold and in pain.

It's what he would consider to be his normal state, but right now it feels amplified, turned up past what he's used to and edging on unbearably noticeable. He's shivering, and he doesn't know why until he realizes that he's in the shower. All his clothes are on and the curtain has been pulled to give him privacy, but the water is ice cold and for some reason, Wilbur knows that if he tries to leave, he'll regret it.

His hair is dripping wet and his eyes sting and he can't curl tighter and make himself smaller so the water hits less of him. Really, he's just – wet. And cold. And terrified. He gets the distinct feeling that he didn't step in here on purpose, because fear makes his heart curl when he goes to reach for the curtain.

*Please*, he wants to say with chattering teeth, *please let me out*.

Eventually, when his fingers are numb and he's shaking all over, he steels himself. He knows what's out there. He knows what to expect. Hypixal. Richard and Walker and Daniel. Jared and – and Jacks. He knows what to expect: curled fists and angry words. Maybe he'll be pushed back into the cold shower. Maybe he'll be berated for wanting to be out in the first place.

Wilbur braces and reaches a trembling hand for the edge of the curtain through his fear.

He can't see for a moment – compared to the showers, the rest of the locker room is bright and he has to blink water out of his eyes to even let them adjust, but when he does, his heart feels like it disappears.

Jared's hair is a dirty blond. It curls around his jaw and hangs loose under his helmet when he plays. Richard's got brown locks, in waves against his head, and he runs his hands through them when he's thinking – Wilbur's seen him do it enough after shoving Wilbur out of the way that he remembers. Jacks – well, Jacks' pure blond, and there's no missing it when he walks into a room with his helmet off. He's proud of it too — that full head of hair that he flips and pulls back when he plays and combs through after matches.



Dirty blond, brown, bright blond. Not a single one of the Hypixal players have hair that's dyed a flamingo pink.

Techno.

And he can recognize Quackity and Schlatt and Sapnap and George. They're all here – they're all out here and he was in there and –

Sapnap turns, and his expression twists into a cruel sort of smile. "Oh look – look who's brave enough to come out."

"Wow," Techno laughs, the sound making terror claw up Wilbur's insides, "you never listen, do you? We said *stay*, mutt. Guess you'll just have to learn."

And then, horribly, George stands and steps forward, cracking his fingers. *Oh god*, Wilbur thinks, *oh god, oh god. He's going to – he didn't listen and now George is gonna –*

George grins. It twists in the lights. "Stay still now, Wilbur, or it'll just hurt worse."

Wilbur tenses, bracing and –

And Wilbur shoots upwards with a pitchy gasp, trembling. The room is dark, nothing like the bright lights of the locker room, and the sheets are thin, so he's awash with chill that feels reminiscent of a shower. Next to him, in the other bed, Sapnap groans and shifts, and a spike of terror makes Wilbur's heart jump.

He twists, throwing his legs over the side of the bed and standing, chest heaving.

"Wil?" Sapnap mumbles, face still in the pillow. "Wilbur, you alright?"

Wilbur edges around their beds, grabbing his key card and hoodie. "Yeah, go back to bed, Sapnap. I'm just...gonna get some ice."

Shockingly, Sapnap isn't settled by that. He sits up quick, twisting, hair a mess. He looks nothing like the dream. This Sapnap is all soft edges and worry. "Ice? Wil, are you hurt?"

Wilbur...doesn't know what to say to that. Why would he be worried about whether Wilbur was hurt? "No," he says slowly. "No, I'm – I'm okay. I'm just thirsty. Sorry for waking you."

Sapnap blinks, then relaxes, running a slow hand through his hair. He yawns, showing his teeth, then drops back onto the bed. "You apologize too much," he grumbles at the ceiling, and, impressively, falls right back to sleep. Wilbur wishes he could do that.

Instead, he's up, and freezing, and his heart is kicking way too hard in his chest for no reason. It was a dream, that's all. Just a stupid dream. His brain got confused, mistaking SMP for Hypixal, that's all. He just needs to relax.

Wilbur slips out of the room and walks a bit, trying to tire himself out. He paces the length of the hall three times before someone opening their door scares him into the elevator and down

to the lobby. The lights are on, as hotels are supposed to have, but no one is at the front desk, so Wilbur can drift through the doors without question.

He doesn't really know where he's going, but when he sees the bench outside, he heads to it, sitting down. He feels awful. He's got a growing headache and he's shaking and he feels like there is something ruined in him. Like he's been drinking oil and now everything he touches is slick.

*You're gonna ruin them, he thinks, if they're not ruining you.*

It's needless to say, but Wilbur doesn't go back to sleep that night.

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Phil mentioned how through every play of a game, a player will carry their mistakes with them, and honestly, he was right.

By the end, Wilbur knows he'll be taking this whole game home, twisting and turning it around in his head until it makes sense to him. Until he can really understand where it is that he went wrong.

He's made every mistake possible out there. His main one being too slow to react and letting a player by him not once, not twice, but *three* times, and then, on what would have been the fourth, getting desperate enough to try and stop them. Of course, he ended up with a hooking call and got put in the box. SMP had to play with one less man out on the ice, and it gave them the advantage needed to score yet again.

He wished he could go back in time and start the game over from the beginning – or even back to halftime, where Phil took one look at Wilbur's feverishly red face and jittery nerves and asked if he needed to sit out – but he *can't* and as stricken as he was at the thought of being taken out of the game, he feels even *worse* when the final whistle blows and it's a lose for SMP, 4 to 1.

Back on Hypixal, at the end of losses, the locker room would be tense to say the least. It was to be expected: no team likes to lose and no one is ever chipper after it happens, but they were different. They were looking for someone to blame, and Wilbur *lived* as an easy target.

Now, it really *is* his fault, so when he gets off the ice, on top of shivering and being feverish and feeling all around just *terrible*, he's anxious too.

He files into the locker room with them, and Sapnap's steps are melting into Richard's, Schlatt's grumbles echo Daniel's, the tension in Techno's expression matches Jacks'. It makes Wilbur's already tight chest tighter with anticipation of pain, of the words, *Soot, come over here and tell us what the fuck you even did in that game besides take up space.*

George shutting his locker is what does it – the loud slam, not even a *real* slam, makes Wilbur jump and open his mouth.

"Sorry," he blurts. They all stop what they're doing and look in his direction. Wilbur tries his best to breathe. "Sorry. That – that game is on me. I should've been better."

There's quiet, a processing quiet in which they all kind of look at him and then each other.

"Yeah," George says suddenly, and Wilbur flinches. *Yeah, you did lose us at least two of those goals. Yeah, speaking as your partner, you were in my way. Yeah, why are you even on this team?* "Yeah, I feel the same. I wasn't as fast as I could've been on some of those plays. I dropped the ball – sorry about that, guys."

Wilbur stares at him, stunned.

"Me too," Quackity sighs, sitting down on the floor cross-legged. "I was really distracted the whole game. This one guy kept saying shit and – ugh, it threw me off. Won't happen again."

"I heard some of that," Sapnap says through gritted teeth. "That's why I got *my* penalty. Still doesn't excuse it, even if hitting that guy felt *really* good."

Quackity laughs and smacks Sapnap's leg and the tension that was holding all of them breaks.

"We all have things we regret from that game. I wasn't as diligent as I could have been about keeping all of us on the same page," Techno admits. "But we all also did *good* things out there. And besides, a loss isn't the end of the world, yeah? We'll play again."

"We should say some of them," George says, looking at Techno like he's trying to pass on this secret message. "Some of the good things that we did this game."

Techno's gaze flickers over to Wilbur and then back to George. Something like understanding passes over his expression. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right George. One thing we did well this game, starting with Wilbur."

It's just like before, except this time, Wilbur genuinely can't think of anything. He's tired, and feels much more like putting down his hockey stick and never picking it back up than trying to convince himself why he should keep going.

"I don't know," he says quietly, shrinking. "I can't think of anything. I'm sorry."

"I can think of something." Schlatt says. He's on the other side of the locker room to Wilbur, and he hasn't been able to look Wilbur in the eyes since that one practice, so when he speaks his eyes are trained on his knee pads, but – "When we took our timeout, you handed me my water. And that was enough."

Wilbur's eyes widen.

*And that was enough. And that was enough.*

Wilbur didn't make a big play, or score the winning goal. They didn't even *win* at all. Wilbur just – was Schlatt's teammate. And that was enough.

"Oh." Wilbur goes. And that's all he can really say. Just as simple. Just as poignant.

George and Techno exchange a smile.

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Wilbur knows they're all concerned later, especially when he lags a little behind them as they follow Phil through the food courts. Honestly, he feels a lot more distant than *that* – he feels like he's floating behind himself – that's how tired he is.

If he had the ability, he would probably detach and go rest. Find somewhere safe enough to curl and sleep. Finally turn off his brain for a moment.

" – lbur. Wilbur." Wilbur blinks and sees Techno standing in front of him, a concerned look on his face. "Wilbur?"

"Sorry," Wilbur says automatically. "I – I missed what you said."

Techno frowns. He reaches out, gently clasping Wilbur's elbow. "We're gonna go to dinner," he says, "are you feeling up to coming?"

Wilbur thinks he would go anywhere in the world with SMP if he was given the chance, and the thought terrifies him.

*Yes*, his brain goes, *who knows how many more of these they'll want to have with you*. But God, is he exhausted.

"We can drop you off at the hotel if you wanted to rest," Techno offers, eyes moving across Wilbur's face quickly. "We could stay in too – order food and just relax."

"No, no, I don't want to be a bother," Wilbur shakes his head. Techno's frown deepens, but Wilbur doesn't want to be reassured. "I think...if you could drop me off. I think I just need some rest."

So that's what they do.

They drop Wilbur off at the hotel, and Techno doesn't have to, but he walks Wilbur upstairs, and watches as Wilbur puts his sports bag down.

"Wilbur," he says suddenly, looking a little uncomfortable but also *determined*, "you know you can come to me for anything, right? Me or the team or Phil?"

Wilbur pauses. "I know, Techno. Thank you."

Techno seems like he wants to say more, but he doesn't. He steps back and gives an awkward smile, and then leaves. And Wilbur sighs, and sets himself down in bed and prays for sleep.

---

Later, the room door opens.

Wilbur's been drifting in and out of sleep for a little bit, falling asleep only to wake up a little while later just to do it all again. It's not fun, but it's more rest than he's gotten in weeks, so he's not going to start complaining now.

"Shit," he hears Sapnap go, then Sapnap repeats it quieter, as if saying it softly takes back the loud one. Wilbur presses back a smile and turns to sit up, yawning. "Oh. Wil, you're up."

"Mh-hm," Wilbur rubs his eyes, watching the way that Sapnap kicks off his shoes and throws off his jacket. "How was dinner?"

"Well," Sapnap huffs, "you weren't there."

Wilbur has no idea what to say when Sapnap says things like this. He just – he doesn't know what the man *means*. He doesn't know what he's meant to say in response. Thankfully, he continues.

"But other than that, it was good. We brought you some mozzarella sticks — Techno made us also get you a side of broccoli or something. Boring. And – oh yeah, Quackity's upset that we're rooming together," he sighs.

Wilbur curls a little. "Oh. Sorry, I thought –"

"No, he wanted to room with *you*. " Sapnap stops at the temperature box. Wilbur blinks, processing that. "Hey – are you cold?"

"I'm alright."

Sapnap turns, disapproving. " *Wilbur*, are you cold?"

Wilbur hesitates. "A little."

Sapnap turns back and starts poking at the box aggressively. When he's satisfied, he turns back. "There. Let me know if you still feel cold – I'm gonna hop in the shower, okay?"

Wilbur nods mutely, watching him go.

By the time that Sapnap is out, Wilbur's eaten the mozzarella sticks and broccoli and is honestly ready to go back to sleep. Sapnap too, judging by the giant yawn he lets out and the way he collapses onto his bed.

"Wil," he says, voice muffled by the covers, "shake me awake in the morning, okay? The alarm isn't good enough."

Wilbur laughs a little, curling up tight and settling back. "Okay, Sapnap. Goodnight."

"Night."

But of course, Wilbur doesn't go to sleep immediately. He *could* sleep longer, he feels tired enough to, but he ends up just *staring* ahead, blinking. He tucks his arms around himself, trying to get back to that comfortable feeling that he had not even an hour ago, but something about Sapnap's presence makes it impossible.

He wants to *cry*. Why can't he sleep in the same room as SMP? Is he always gonna be like this?

"Wilbur?" Sapnap says a little later, voice groggy. Probably awoken by Wilbur's tossing and turning. "You okay? Are you cold?"

Wilbur curls his fingers into his palms. "Um. A little. It's fine though, I'm –"

Sapnap shifts, and for a moment Wilbur thinks he's going back for the temperature box on his left, but then he rolls. He stands up right by Wilbur's bed, and Wilbur stares.

"Sapnap, what are you –"

Sapnap cuts him off by climbing into Wilbur's bed and wrapping his limbs around him. Wilbur stiffens.

"Sapnap –"

Sapnap presses his face in the crook of Wilbur's neck. "Goodnight."

Wilbur blinks. After a moment when Sapnap doesn't move, he eases, letting himself relax. Sapnap is warm – blissfully warm – and he's half on top of Wilbur, almost covering him up like a blanket. In any other circumstance, the weight on top of Wilbur would be panic inducing, but – well, this is different. Here, he *knows* this is Sapnap's heaviness and no one else's. Those are Sapnap's palms curling into his shirt, and Sapnap's legs tangling with his own, and Sapnap's breathing whistling against his skin. The hold that Sapnap has on him is almost *protective* and Wilbur realizes –

He's warm and also *safe* with Sapnap curled around him like this.

Nothing can reach him here. And with that thought, Wilbur's eyes flutter and close.

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"What?" Wilbur blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"Dinner," Quackity repeats, smile still in place like he isn't shaking Wilbur's whole world. "My mama is hosting. It's the first one out of what I hope are many, but I've always wanted to have one, I just never had a team to invite. Now I do!"

"And...and you want me?" Wilbur asks, dumbfounded.

A flicker of something passes over Quackity's expression, but it's gone before Wilbur can figure out whether or not it's bad. "Of course, Wilbur. What do you mean? You're a part of the team. I want the team there."

"Oh."

"Is that– is that alright?" Quackity frowns. "It's okay if you don't want–"

"No!" Wilbur blurts, cheeks flushed. "No, I – yes please. I'd love that. I'd love to –" *be a part of this team, be invited, be allowed in*, "have dinner with you guys."

That's how a couple of days later find Wilbur sitting in the corner of Quackity's mother's warm, yellow kitchen, watching Techno try to wash dishes while she smacks at his arm with a dish towel. Quackity is at Sapnap's side, as always, talking to Karl, who's got a stack of board games in front of him on the kitchen island. They're trying to decide between

monopoly and catan, and Wilbur keeps hearing the words *catan isn't even real* – followed by *neither is monopoly, they're both fictional board games!* George fell asleep in the living room after dinner, and it was sweet the way that the team turned the lights down, muted the television, and moved rooms without a question.

Wilbur, honestly, has just been dazed the whole time. The house is warm and still smells like the amazing dishes that Quackity's mother served, and his belly was warm and full, and he felt on the verge of tears from how comfortable it all was. There was a dim headache creeping up from the back of his neck, and his nose felt blocked, but even the oncoming cold couldn't stop his good mood.

"I feel bad," Techno is saying, still trying to edge over to the full sink, "we already ate all your food — *delicious* food, by the way, so amazing and we're very grateful – but I feel like I should –"

"You ate all my food because you are my guests," Quackity's mother insists, pushing him back with her hands. She's a small woman, almost as tall as Quackity himself, so it's amusing to watch her try to push Techno back away from the sink. "Phil raised you too well, you are too polite for your own good."

*That* makes Techno falter and flush.

Wilbur bites back a smile. He can't imagine ever doing this with Hypixal. Sure he wanted to be invited to their gatherings and outings, but thinking about it now, he can't imagine that he would ever have fun there. He never felt comfortable in the practices or scrimmages. He always held himself tense around them, just waiting for the next shoe to drop – or punch to land – so he always had to deal with the conflicting emotions of being grateful for being unloved.

Here, he's invited, and he's a lot less tense, and he's warm. He wouldn't go so far as to say that he's loved, but he is certainly at least tolerated, which is much more than Wilbur could've asked for with Hypixal.

And he's unhurt. And he's remained unhurt since he first stepped onto SMP practice ice. He just – he wishes his brain would get the memo.

"Soot," Schlatt calls. Wilbur looks over. The man is leaning against the doorway, a beer in hand, all lax and casual. "You wanna take a walk?"

Wilbur's instinct is to say, *no please*, but also, *yes thank you*, because this is really the first time Schlatt's directly spoken to him in *weeks*, but also this is what Hypixal has done to him. This is what they took from him: the ability to have a thought without countering it. The ability to want something without fearing it in turn. Schlatt would never hurt him *intentionally*, and it's proven by the way that the man has carried his half-conscious body to help and bundled him close like Wilbur was just a piece of his heart that somehow got loose from his chest. It's also proven by the way he's been tip-toeing around in his *own* spaces just because Wilbur's been around.

"Sure," Wilbur makes himself say, and mentally chants *Schlatt will not hurt me, Schlatt would not hurt me*, just to counteract the running commentary of – *he wants you outside, he wants you away from the others, somewhere where you won't be heard, somewhere where his large hands can curl over your throat and squeeze the yells out of you before they carry over the air*. "Just let me grab my coat –"

"No need," Schlatt tosses him his flannel. "Take that. I'm warm anyway," he holds up the beer as an explanation, then doesn't give Wilbur the chance to protest because he's turning and walking out.

Wilbur has no choice but to scramble to follow.

Schlatt sits himself on the porch steps, and Wilbur shuffles behind him, hesitant, the wool flannel in his arms. He feels out of place, too tall in the doorway, but too small to sit at Schlatt's side.

"I'm not gonna tell you to sit next to me, but you *could* if you wanted to."

Wilbur hesitates, then slips down the stairs and folds himself at Schlatt's side. He leaves a healthy amount of space between them, but not because *he's* afraid. Just for Schlatt. Just in case.

"What's – um – what's going on?" Wilbur asks.

Schlatt looks slightly uncomfortable now. Now that he has to *talk*, it seems like he regrets calling Wilbur out here. "I wanted to tell you something. Something important. But I don't know how to say it."

Wilbur hesitates. "I can wait. If that helps? I can just– wait for you to figure it out."

Schlatt grimaces, and they sit there in companionable quiet for a moment as he finds his words. Wilbur takes to looking up at the sky – from Quackity's mother's place the stars are all visible, and it's beautiful.

"I –" he starts suddenly, and Wilbur drags his eyes away from the stars to Schlatt's side profile. "I know what it's like to be...hurt."

Oh.

"Not by my team. Not by my coaches. But – someone who is supposed to be important. Someone who isn't supposed to fucking –" he takes a harsh breath. "You know. People are always fucking doing shit they're not supposed to."

Wilbur folds his arms over his knees, then lays his chin on them. Schlatt doesn't need him to speak. Schlatt needs him to listen. So he will.

"I didn't even know that coaches and teammates could do the shit that Hypixal did to you, but honestly, I don't fucking know why I'm surprised," he huffs. "Seeing you those first couple of tournaments *hurt*, Soot. Really. And – and the practice, when I hit you – fuck, I don't want to



be anything like them." He pauses, then quieter, confesses: "I don't want to be anything like my dad."

Oh.

A frown pulls at Wilbur's lips. "Schlatt. You aren't."

"You don't know that."

"I know what it feels like to be hurt," Wilbur says bluntly, making Schlatt flinch, "and I know what it *doesn't* feel like. You...you don't feel like that."

"Soot, you can't fucking sleep around me." Schlatt shoots at him. "Don't pretend like I haven't noticed. You – you flinch and you go all tense and you – you act like *me* back *before*, and if I make you feel even a fraction of that, then –"

Wilbur doesn't know how to explain the way his body has turned hypervigilant to keep him safe. He's spent so long purposefully hurting himself for other people that it just doesn't *trust* anymore. Outside of his own volition even. If Wilbur had a dial or setting inside of him that could go *SMP are safe always*, he would click it. He would. For them, he would let his own heart get broken.

"I'll tell you." Wilbur says suddenly. Schlatt looks at him. "If you make me feel like that, then I'll tell you, Schlatt. I promise."

A conflicted expression passes over Schlatt's face, then – "I want to be safe for you, Soot. Everyone hurt you, and I want – I want to be a place you can hide."

Wilbur fights back the urge to cry. Here he is, outside in the cool air, body warm because he's wrapped up in Schlatt, heart warm because he's wrapped up in Schlatt – comfortable under the stars. *I want to be a place you can hide*, God knows Wilbur could use one or two of those. And he knows that if Schlatt is one, then he'll be safe for a *long* while .

Instead of crying, Wilbur scoots closer, letting their knees tap and thighs press. "You are, Schlatt. I promise." He pauses, then goes, "and I'll be that for you."

Schlatt doesn't respond verbally, but he reaches out and curls a hand around the nape of Wilbur's neck and drags him closer, and Wilbur shudders pleasantly from the inside out, practically purring under the touch. It's a sensitive spot, his neck, and he protects it more than anywhere else, but when the touch is paired with the words *I want to be a place you can hide*, Wilbur doesn't feel the need to curl so tightly around it.

He finds that he could stay tucked here for the rest of his life if he was allowed. And he isn't sure, but he thinks Schlatt would let him.

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At first when he hears the voice, Wilbur thinks he's dreaming.

It's ten minutes before their next game – local, thank God, even though he loves traveling, all of it was making Wilbur stressed – and he's in one of the side halls off the rinks because he

just wanted to catch his breath before the game.

He's jittery, so he's pacing back and forth and counting his fingers as he folds them, trying to relax himself. He turns, takes four long strides, then turns back to take four more. He's on his third revolution and he's finally starting to calm down when –

"Well, look what we have here."

Wilbur jolts to a stop. He turns slowly, and maybe he's dramatic, but he feels like he's in a horror movie when he sees combed blond hair pulled back into a ponytail and icy blue eyes and broad shoulders draped in green and white.

"Soot," Jacks says, a slow smirk curving over his face. Wilbur, suddenly tongue-tied and quaky kneed, stumbles backwards when the man steps closer. It's sick and cruel when the small of his back hits the hall wall and stops him from moving any more. It's sick and cruel when his heart rises to his throat, lodging there and keeping him from calling out to the team that he knows is right around the corner. Jacks, of course, knows what Wilbur looks like consumed by terror, and so his grin only widens. "You've not changed a bit, huh?"

"What – what are you doing here?" Wilbur manages, trying to curl in as much as he can, but it's hard when Jacks just keeps coming. "Please – don't – don't –"

"I'm here to play some fucking *hockey*, Soot," Jacks says, sharply, smacking the wall right by Wilbur's ear, making the man flinch sharply. "On my *new* team because your bitch-ass couldn't handle tough love."

Love? *Love*? Even through Wilbur's fear, something in him echoes that word back incredulously. Tough or not, how Wilbur was treated on Hypixal wasn't love. He thinks he knew it back then, but the past couple of months has solidified it for him. Splitting fries with Quackity, or curling up under Sapnap, or being nudged into a warm home by Techno. *That* is love.

"No," Wilbur says quietly, something like a small fire lighting inside of him. Jacks repeats him, threatening and questioning, like *oh? Go on?* But Wilbur refuses to be shut up. "No. That wasn't love. It wasn't tough. It was cruel and you guys were *sick*. And – and I didn't deserve that."

Jacks seems stunned for a moment, and because of it Wilbur gets maybe half a second of triumph. That is, of course, right before Jacks' expression hardens and his balled up fist drives directly into Wilbur's gut. Wilbur gasps, folding over the arm, all the air whooshing out of his stomach. Somehow, it's worse than a punch. It's stronger. Wilbur wonders if he's just gotten used to not being hit or if Jacks had gotten stronger in their time apart. Whatever it is, it causes the hurt to reach *deep*.

"Shut the *fuck* up, Soot," Jacks growls. "You don't get to destroy your team and then *laugh* about it."

"You guys," Wilbur wheezes, forcing himself upright, and curling his arms around himself, "are not my team."

Jacks glares, but instead of striking again, he steps back, his smug smirk settled back in place. "You know what? You're right. We aren't on the same team anymore. I'm looking *forward* to this match. You're not gonna know what hit you."

And then he stalks away, and Wilbur's left in the hallway holding himself together with shaking arms.

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The pain is making Wilbur's head fuzzy.

He's losing time – he knows he is – because one moment he's watching Sapnap screw the top onto his water bottle after filling it up, and then the next he's on the ice, blinking like he's just woken up. It wasn't even a particularly bad hit, he's had much worse, but – fuck, if it isn't a shock to be on the ice and in pain again after so long of not needing to.

And especially with Jacks' antagonistic smirk just a little ways in front of him, Wilbur wants this game over *now*. He wants to go to his house – or better yet – Sapnap's. He wants to sink into the man's couch cushions and listen to Quackity clatter around in the kitchen, or scoot over until he's leaning against Schlatt enough that the man has to throw an arm over Wilbur's shoulders and tug him in to get him to settle down, or sit at the counter in George's kitchen and watch him wash kale and cut potatoes. He wants to follow Techno over to Phil's and listen to him tell stories about Techno's first goal or first pair of skates while Techno pretends to be embarrassed. He wants to be anywhere other than the ice, he wants to do anything other than play this game.

The whistle blows. The game starts.

For the first twenty minutes, it's a pretty steady game. Wilbur's shaky, but with every second that passes without Jacks just straight up *charging* at him like a bull, he relaxes. SMP, as always, are good, and so Jacks' attention is diverted into playing *real* hockey and keeping them from advancing through the zones and scoring.

Sapnap scores their first goal, and Wilbur takes a breath. He can read in the lines of Sapnap's movements that he feels good today. That, even if one of them is distracted, Sapnap won't be. So Wilbur's shaky limbs and ducking shoulders shouldn't prevent SMP from winning.

That means that Wilbur can focus completely on Jacks' clearly growing agitation.

When the man gets the puck, he muscles his way down the ice, towards Wilbur's defense.

Last practice they worked on footwork for hours: Phil set up cones and had them challenge each other to races through the shapes. By the end it was tied between him and Quackity, and they settled the tie by deciding to share the prize – not having to clean up the rink by the end of practice.

Quackity was excited to have another player to go toe to toe with in speed, and Wilbur couldn't duck away from the praise that he showered him in. *You move like water*, he had said, eyes glimmering, *like you just have to run*.

So Wilbur knows that he can skate. That he's graceful and refined on the ice. Which is why it's such a surprise when he turns, switches his hips, and almost gets bowled over by Jacks' reckless movement.

Here's what Wilbur will say about the fall: he's lucky he had a helmet, or else he wouldn't be getting back up. His head was fine for the most part, but, in the time that Wilbur's vision blipped, he forgot that the rest of his body was even *there*, and the sharp pain jamming into his rib was the result of that.

Something cracks and he gasps, curling up tight on the ice. Around him, whistles are screaming and people are yelling – Phil, he thinks, cursing loudly at the referees, and maybe Sapnap, throwing his body through the other team to try to get to him – but Wilbur's head is tipping backward, tumbling away from the pain.

It's why he hardly feels it when George kneels down at his side and cradles his face in ungloved hands, helping off his helmet in order to look in his lidded eyes.

"Wilbur," George goes. It sounds like rain. Everything feels like water. "Wilbur, focus on my voice. I need you to lie still, okay? They're going to bring a trainer out to look at you and see if you're safe to move, but we're going to be right here."

Wilbur's eyes flutter. He finds it hard to *breathe* without stabbing pain. It radiates out from his chest through every breath, inescapable, as if it's just as much a part of him as his heart. It consumes him almost, washing over him like a wave, and horribly there's nowhere to run from it.

A hand squeezes his, another brushes his back gently, but Wilbur's too far away to place these touches.

It feels like hours but also seconds that pass for the trainer to kneel in front of him, and move a finger over Wilbur's hazy vision. He stumbles through the questions that he's answered a million times like this: *what is your name? Who is the president? What year is it? Do you know where you are?*

The trainer turns a little to talk to Phil, who's suddenly there, floating along the edges of Wilbur's vision, expression like a cracked open fountain. "If you can help him to my office, we can get him some bandages and ice for his ribs – I highly suspect that he's going to need to be seen just to make sure the damage isn't worse than a crack."

"Worse than a –" Phil swallows, then shakes his head, pulling himself together. "Okay. Alright. Alright – Techno?"

Wilbur blinks, and suddenly both Techno and Schlatt are there, and Techno is speaking lowly, and Schlatt is reaching down and Wilbur, even in pain, would know those hands only mean safety, so he clumsily latches on.

---

Schlatt is steaming.

They were just getting into their momentum with scoring and now it's completely gone, so if they *were* to keep playing, they'd have to work to get it back. On top of that, this fucking team is *issing him off*. He's never played against a team more mouthy and more *awful* at hockey – like, if you're fucking bad, you should shut the fuck up? It's annoying as hell.

But that's nothing compared to how angry he is when he has to pick Wilbur up off yet *another* ice rink and listen to him bite back whimpers as he's jostled.

He's practically *seething* when he has to shift Wilbur onto his back and carry him through the halls, but he's still careful. He's careful because he didn't have someone to be careful with him when he needed it. He's careful because he *promised* Wilbur that he'd be. Because Wilbur deserves that.

But God is it hard to hear his brother make those terrible pained sounds right by his ear. They're only a couple of turns away from the trainers when Wilbur goes quiet. Weirdly quiet. Awfully quiet.

"Wil?" Techno goes, clearly realizing what Schlatt already has.

On Schlatt's back, Wilbur shifts, then speaks –

"Please," he mumbles, his head lolling a little from where it's resting against Schlatt. Schlatt's stomach clenches, and he resists the urge to shout at the people milling about, in front of them, in their way as they try to get him to the trainer. Don't they see? Can't they see that fuzz in his eyes? The ache that has to be riddling his body? He couldn't even hold himself up – can hardly speak. "Please. Can I –"

He cuts himself off.

"Can you what, Wil?" Techno asks, a bit distracted by trying to turn the corner through the crowd. Schlatt follows, careful to make sure his steps don't falter even with Wilbur's added weight on his back. Schlatt will never be someone that causes him pain – not again. "What do you need?"

"Can I please have a painkiller?" Wilbur breathes. Techno stops. Schlatt nearly careens into him, and Wilbur whimpers at the sudden movement. *Fuck*, Schlatt thinks. For *many* reasons. *Fuck*.

"Wh – what?" Techno asks, eyes wide. "I'm...sorry? What did you ask?"

Wilbur hesitates, as if ashamed. As if someone has given him a reason to be ashamed. "Please," his voice is barely a whisper now. Schlatt can't see them, but he's sure that Wilbur's eyes are distant – he might not even be seeing them. "I'll be rougher next time. Better. I'll hurt them more. Can I just – please, can I have a painkiller?" He inhales shakily. "It really hurts."

Techno stares. Wilbur must take the silence as a negative, because he inhales again, then goes, "I just – I can't breathe, and I – I'm sorry."

Schlatt wants to hit something.

When he was younger, he used to apologize a lot. Back when he was really small – small enough that he had velcro on his shoes and an actual zip up lunch box – small enough that when he got hurt, he got really fucking *hurt*. He was in and out of the hospital for a lot of those early years. Things that seem little now, but back then were big. And every time he came home from one of these mysterious trips, he found something new to apologize for. His voice, the way he stood, the words he used, the things he cared about, the people he spoke to, the people that he didn't. He was molded, in a way, in the span of time that it took from him to be driven to the emergency room and then back after the all clear. Every new hurt was a chip with a hammer and nail, and he was sculpted. He was his father's masterpiece.

But that was back before. Now, he's not so sure, he doesn't speak to that man unless he can't help it, but *fuck* if Wilbur's voice doesn't remind him vividly of nights spent curled up on the carpet pressed between his bed-side table and bed-frame; of nights spent glaring at gift-shop balloons from where he was laid in a hospital bed for a broken wrist; of entire *years* spent putting on an act for the entire panel of judges that his father made himself out to be.

Here Wilbur is, apologizing for not being about to breathe through a cracked rib, and he's supposed to be under Schlatt's protection, and –

“Move Techno,” Schlatt says, stepping forward. Techno steps to the side easily, still with that stunned expression on his face. “Follow me or don't – I'm getting him some help.”

He doesn't know why Wilbur would ask for painkillers – actually, he could probably figure it out if he spent even one spare second thinking about it, but he doesn't want to know, so – he just pushes on. He carries Wilbur through the crowd, and if he quietly promises that they'll get Wilbur whatever he needs – that Schlatt will *personally* see to it that he's taken care of – well, that's his business and his business alone.

---

The next couple of hours make Wilbur's head feel like an old radio that's being dialed in.

He just gets bits and pieces, really.

There's Schlatt settling him down on a cot, then Phil appearing from nowhere with a fresh bag of ice. There's Techno, on the phone, and Sapnap, suddenly at his side, slipping a warm hand into one of his. There are the words *cracked ribs*, and *bruising*, and George looking off to the side like he's caught in a memory, and Schlatt demanding to know what they need to do to help him get better.

There's the ride to the hospital, and an x-ray, and more ice and more hand-holding, and by the end of it all, Wilbur's so exhausted that he doesn't care who's in the room when he passes out. He doesn't expect them to still be there when he wakes up, so why should it matter?

Which is exactly why when he wakes up a couple of hours later, still drowsy from the painkillers and his head full of lingering nightmares, he panics.

There are people in the room – someone is right next to him, actually, curled into his side. There's a hand over his ankle and another in his hair and oh God, *oh God*. *There's one curled right by his neck.*

Wilbur can't honestly say he remembers much of his time at Hypixal, okay. Obviously, he remembers the big things – practices that went badly, games that they managed to pull out of their ass, sitting curled up on a bus on his own while everyone else laughs without him – but a lot of it is just - missing. He spent a lot of time hurt and lonely and distant. But one thing he will never ever forget is the ending of their local championship match.

The hand on the back of Wilbur's neck flexes painlessly, and Wilbur tumbles backwards into a memory.

*After games, Wilbur gets – restless.*

*Leftover adrenaline, he's theorized. He feels like he should still be out there, on the ice, in the pits, stick up, guard up, looking for the next bump to turn into a knock to turn into a hit to turn into his coach giving an approving nod as he wipes blood off his chin. He's careful though, as he comes into the locker room, careful to step over all his teammates lounging and stretching. Careful to stay as – calm as he can manage. A towel goes sailing over his head and he ducks, then winces as the action pulls at a sore muscle in his side.*

*"Aw," a rough voice calls, going high – teasing. Walker, never leaving Wilbur alone for a moment. "Widdle runt Wilbur. Does it hurt? Hm?" Wilbur casts his gaze over to the blond, but doesn't respond, knowing well enough by now that – "How sad," he says. Yeah, there it is. "Cause you hardly even put that guy down the way you were supposed to."*

*Wilbur's shoulders dip in slightly. He gets to his locker – by the corner as always – and hesitates briefly. Jacks, sitting in the middle of the bench with his legs spread, subtly scoots over, leaving no room.*

*Instantly, Wilbur pulls his limbs back in close to himself. What was he thinking? Of course not.*

*"He's right," Jared says suddenly, pushing off the lockers he was leaning on, stepping closer. Legs, stretched across the floor, pull in as he stalks closer. Wilbur inhales sharply, then presses back into the metal behind him, wishing he could melt into the locker.*

*Then he banishes the thought – the only thing keeping them from stuffing him inside is his height. He should be grateful for every bit of open space they give him. He should be grateful for every kindness that they show – everything can always be worse.*

*"You," Jared continues, "are becoming more of a problem than a help."*

*"I tried," Wilbur says, twisting his hands into the hem of his jersey. They won't stop shaking, so he keeps moving them, rumpling and smoothing the fabric, bunching and pulling it. "I – I tried, I swear, but he was bigger than me, and it hurt and I just –"*

*Jared, suddenly way close, slams a fist into the locker right beside Wilbur's head. Wilbur's jaw snaps closed so tight that he tastes blood. Jared stares, eyes hard and angry, for a long moment.*

Be quiet, his eyes say, no one asked you to speak. And then, something Wilbur's heard time and time before: the only noise you're good for is pained.

"Boys," Jared calls, his lip curling up a dash. Wilbur instantly knows he isn't being addressed. "Question. Why did we lose that game just now?"

Without missing a beat, they all go, "Soot," and Wilbur, quite honestly, wants to stop existing. Jared is still crowded too far in, not giving him enough space to move, to straighten, to breathe .

"Well, well," he says. "Looks like everyone's in agreement. You failed that one for us. Sometimes, Soot, I wonder if you're even a team-player."

Wilbur opens his mouth, closes it. Shuffles. He needs – he can't move. He needs to move. He has to –

Jared's hand shoots out. It grabs Wilbur's wrist and squeezes. Wilbur cries out, knees wobbling, sinking a bit, trying to make himself stay still . Jared, a cold look in his eyes and a hard line for a mouth, squeezes until Wilbur's sharp cry trails into pained whines and pants, until his fingernails bite into Wilbur's sensitive skin, until Wilbur's sure the bone will snap through.

"Stop moving," Jared growls. "Can't you do anything right?"

"I'm sorry," Wilbur pants, trembling. "I'm sorry, I'm –"

"Make him say what he's sorry for," Daniels calls, a curl of glee tucked in his voice. "Come on – that game was his fucking fault, he should own up for it."

Jared smiles, approving. "Hm." His hold lessens, and Wilbur thinks he's being shown mercy, but then Jared steps ever closer and pushes Wilbur back flat against the lockers, getting a forearm lodged against his pale throat. Wilbur chokes. "You heard the man. Say what you're sorry for. I mean, if you're even sorry at all."

Wilbur tries to breathe in – can't. There isn't any room . There isn't any room.

Jared tsks. "Oh no," he coos. "That won't do." Then he jerks his arm upward , and Wilbur's hands automatically come up to grab at the thing blocking his flow of oxygen. Wilbur gets his nails into Jared's sleeve before the man's other hand comes and gathers them roughly, squeezing like before. "Soot. Don't be bad, now. Come on. Use your words. You're allowed. I mean, if you truly cared about this team, you'd put in the effort."

I care , he wants to scream. I care. I care . Nonsensically he thinks, put me back on the ice, I'll win. I'll fight and I'll break them all. I'll break myself. Please – please.

"So-rry," Wilbur manages, wheezing, "So- I'm sorr –"

"For what?"

"Losing the game," he bites. His vision goes spotty. "Sorry."



*"Good boy," Daniels cheers, pleased. Jared, with Wilbur's darkening eyesight, seems to laugh.*

*"Oh yeah, Soot. Good." Wilbur's rewarded with Jared's forearm lessening the pressure on his throat. He fights for a breath. "What else?"*

*"I'm sorry," frantically, Wilbur tries to think, "for – for not taking the hits. For not fighting harder. For – not –"*

*"I didn't get my blood on the ice," Richard, who looks preoccupied as he puts away his gear, sighs. He sounds almost bored with how Wilbur is on the verge of passing out. Like it isn't enough.*

*Jared presses in again.*

*"For not bleeding," Wilbur gasps suddenly. "Sorry – sorry."*

*"Okay." Jared lets go of Wilbur's wrists, but Wilbur's limbs are too heavy to try fighting back anymore. "Is that all boys? Anything else he's done wrong?"*

*"One more," Jacks says suddenly. Eyes intent. They fix onto Wilbur's dilated pupils. "One more. For me."*

*"You heard the man." Jared says. "Speak, Soot."*

*He doesn't have to think about it this time.*

*"I'm sorry," he inhales raggedly, "for taking up space."*

There are two simultaneous urges in Wilbur. The embedded instinct to curl away from the hands holding him and hide and try to protect himself as much as possible, and then the learned action of laying still, taking whatever is being given, waiting until it's over.

He's awful, and has always been awful, and never fucking learns, so he curls up tight. The hands dislodge, but pain so sharp and searing that it feels like a hot poker being pressed against his body erupts over his ribs.

"Fuck," he hears a voice go. "Wilbur, Wil –" he hears another.

He ignores the pain, curling tighter, trying to hide his neck, trying to reduce his space. A hand brushes his shoulder, and he flinches, begging, *please – please, I'm sorry – don't hurt me.* The hand retracts quickly, but another comes, finding his wrists, curling around them solidly.

"Wilbur," a voice goes, strong and – and almost unrecognizable from the nightmare that he remembers. "Wilbur, can you open your eyes for me please?"

Wilbur squeezes his eyes shut further. He's a coward, always has been, because he doesn't want to see these fists coming. Begging never did anything before, but still – "Jared," he breathes, "Jared, please don't –"

“I’m not Jared,” the voice goes. And the hands around him don’t tighten or squeeze or strangle. They simply hold, and keep holding. *I’m here*, the touch says. *I’m here and you’re alright*. “I promise you that I’m not.”

Wilbur, hesitantly, opens his eyes. George’s sleep rumpled face looks back at him, expression patient, with only the barest wrinkle of distress in between his furrowed brows. “George,” Wilbur breathes.

“Hi, Wil,” he says.

Oh.

The hands, the closeness. That wasn’t – it wasn’t –

He looks over, and sees Techno hovering worriedly, sees Quackity, wringing his hands together, looking like he just flew off the hospital bed in a panic, sees Sapnap, shifting from foot to foot as if restless, sees Schlatt, with that grim expression that Wilbur’s learning only means regret. Wilbur sees George – not Jared, not Jacks – *George*, and his team.

Wilbur uncurls.

“Sorry,” he says, and George lets him go, lets him wrap his arms around the ache echoing through his middle. “Sorry, I – bad dream.”

It’s quiet, but then –

“You get those a lot,” Sapnap reports. It isn’t a question. “Bad dreams.”

Wilbur doesn’t know why he feels so ashamed to have been seen. To have someone look at his hurts and keep looking, as if it’ll ever get better. “Yeah,” he admits tiredly, because lying is just too much to think about right now. “Sorry, I’m – I’m trying.”

“Today was a lot, Wil,” Quackity frowns. Hesitantly, he creeps forward, and when Wilbur doesn’t flinch away, he leans against the side of the bed. “You don’t have to say sorry for being stressed out.”

“And we know that you’re trying,” Techno says. “We know. We see it. We appreciate all your efforts.”

“But is it enough?”

Techno seems confused. “You’ll always be enough.”

“I don’t feel like enough,” Wilbur admits. His eyes flicker over to Schlatt. “When – when do I start feeling like I deserve it?”

“It’s not about deserve, Soot.” Schlatt hesitates, then goes, softer, “Wilbur. It’s not about deserve. You earned having people care about you just by living. We aren’t gonna make you work for it. No one should have.”

“Hypixal did.” Wilbur says, letting his eyes drop to his hands. “They did, and now sometimes when I look at you all, I see them. And I don’t want to. I don’t want that. You guys are so different. It’s just – my brain can’t –”

“That’s alright,” Techno reassures.

“Is it?”

“Yeah,” he nods. “Wilbur, you’ve been with them for a while. You take all the time you need to adjust. We’re still gonna be here. We aren’t going anywhere. You don’t have to be afraid to be vulnerable around us, because we *want* that. We want to help.”

“It’s cliché,” Sapnap cuts in, giving a lopsided little smile, “but we’re a team. We win the championships together and we run the laps together. Ups and downs. No matter what. Nobody is going anywhere.”

Oh, Wilbur realizes suddenly. Oh. *This* is loyalty. A pledge to stay through the good and the bad, not a promise to overlook the bad.

“Promise?” Wilbur asks, because he’s horrible, and clingy, and desperate, and needy, and doesn’t deserve what they’re offering –

“We promise,” Techno says easily, and just like that, Wilbur’s brain quiets.

---

George didn't mean to find it.

Well, he wasn't looking for it specifically. He just wanted the case file on Hypixal. That's all. Phil was running late, and Techno has a spare key to his office that is kept in his locker and *Techno* never locks his locker because George's team is a bunch of over-trusting idiots –

And because they're over-trusting, neglectful, loving fools, George wanted to just *see* the file. He wanted to cast his eyes over the case and gauge the chances that they would be back. Because if they *would*, George would need to be ready. He won't be caught lax when his team is involved.

It's only three weeks after the game where George didn't even *recognize* that Jacque 'Jacks' Dupont was on the ice with them, and George knows he's *never* going to let that happen again. That's his job, and he takes it so seriously.

And of course, part of it – the part he can't vocalize yet – is that sometimes, at night, he lies there, unable to stop thinking about Wilbur when he woke up from that nightmare. Unable to stop thinking about the way his arms snapped up to guard his face and head. That was the curl of someone begging to survive. That was the shape of a person who pressed themselves into the dirt before someone decided to stomp them there.

*Jared*, Wilbur had whimpered at George, *Jared, please, don't* –

George grits his teeth.

Wilbur was *his* now. And George's people don't beg to survive. They simply do .

So, yeah, George was in the office looking for the Hypixal case. Anything would've been good; photos of all their faces, transcripts of the trial, the coach's address, *their* addresses—God, what George would give to get that – but George didn't find any of that. What he did find was ten times worse.

A manila folder tucked to the back corner of a shelf. Placed gingerly, as if the contents of it were sacred, and deathly important. It was thick with paper, and it intrigued George because as long as he's known Phil, he's known the man to be well organized. He doesn't like it when his binders are bulging, he doesn't like when the spines of folders crack. When he gives out sheets of printed paper for new team plays, they're both front and back so it isn't overwhelming.

*Maybe, George thinks, this is Phil's Hypixal research.*

It makes sense as he reaches for it and flicks it open, because Phil's smoldering anger in the locker room the day they found Wilbur laying limp was more than just horror or rage. It was a *promise*. It was retribution in the distance. He and Phil are the same, George has noticed, except where Phil fights with research and rules, George uses his hands.

He imagines, if pushed enough, Phil would use his hands as well.

But, when George trains his eyes on the words on the page, every tangible thought he has disappears. He can't move, he can't speak, he can't do anything other than *read*.

That's how Sapnap finds him.

"George," he says, poking his head into the open doorway, "we're warming up if you –"

George doesn't look up, so he doesn't know *what* Sapnap sees on his expression that makes him stop, but it doesn't matter. Sapnap steps closer, wary.

"George? What's going on?" He gets close enough to the file to see the pages. George is on page five, and there's no end in sight. "What the fuck? What the hell is this?"

George can't *talk*.

Sapnap blusters though the page, tone hiking up further and further, and it's his noise that brings Schlatt into the room, then Quackity, and then finally, Techno. The sight of his captain should be enough to calm George, but it's not, not when the man takes a page – the page that reads *broken collarbone, sprain wrist, various marks across the shoulder blades, locker-slate shaped redness by the small of the back* – and reads it aloud in a trembling tone.

"What," Techno takes a breath, "is this?"

George doesn't answer. Technoblade isn't stupid. Never had been. He can't blame the man for not wanting to believe what his eyes are telling him though.

"Wilbur," someone says, and George can't place the voice. "It's Wilbur. It was— this was him. Before."

George can't feel his hands.

Grade school, his fourth year. He got a shiny pair of ice skates and that whole summer he made his mom buy out rink time so he could spin around and around as fast as he could. He would press his arms over his chest until he could spin and not wobble, and then when he finally wasn't falling, he would spin until he stopped being dizzy.

He loved the speed, the grace. He wanted to be something more than he was, and skating was that. When all the other kids went to the beach, or the park, or to ride roller coasters, George went to the rink. He always came out with pleased, flushed cheeks and a proud smile.

And then school started.

He doesn't know how word circulated, but soon everyone knew that he wanted to *ice skate*. And they said it like it was *dirty*, like it was an awful word. They said it like the rink air didn't clear George's head, like the spins didn't shake something off his bones, like the gentle swish of blade cutting through ice didn't help him *breathe*.

They would corner him – in the halls, after lunch, at the back of the school. They would call him names, horrible names, and it hurt, but the hits that they threw hurt more. The way they would laugh as he fell hurt *worse*. He would – after they'd leave, *bored* – pick himself himself up, dazed and distant and black and blue, and stumble to the nurse.

*I fell on the football fields, he'd lie, I was too rough wrestling in gym, I tripped down the steps. I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay.*

The nurse would click her tongue and check him out, giving him ice and bandages and pain-killers. She'd take her bright red pen and pink notepad and write him a slip.

*Give this to your parents, she'd say, bring it back signed.*

George would take the slip with trembling hands and nod. Then he, aching and tired, would walk home. He would sneak in through the kitchen, pet the cat that was lounging on the counter, drift by his living room and his mother's closed bedroom door, and get to his own. He would, tiringly, kneel down and reach under his bed for the box there. It was just an old shoebox, the one he actually got his skates in. He'd open it, and instead of skates, what looked back at him were a bunch of tiny pink slips. All inked in red, all crumpled and folded. Some were tear stained, some were blood stained.

George, exhausted, would add the new slip, and shove the box under his bed, and head to the kitchen for some water.

It wasn't that his mother didn't care – she did. She worked nights at a hospital, and she didn't *need* to worry about him. He was *fine*. It would pass. There was no way that people found another person suffering so entertaining. Not for long.

But, of course, people live to surprise. That year passed, and the next, and the next, and the kids only got bigger. They only got meaner.

George would huddle outside, under the metal bleachers, hands numb, heart fluttering in his chest, mentally chanting, *I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay.*

His box of slips only got bigger, and the number of bruises only increased, and he felt like he was constantly drifting. Like he was a shadow stuck on Earth. What other purpose did he have than to hurt?

And then he saw his first hockey match. It was one of the rare weekends his mother had off, and she took him to a game, because she had always been a fan. He sat there, hands in his lap, eyes wide as he watched the men clash on the ice. They pushed and shoved and curved around the ice, all hulking shoulders and tense jaws. When they got knocked, they knocked back, and if they didn't go down, then they were taking someone *else* down.

*That's what I want,* George thought, curling his small hands into fists. *I want to be the person that doesn't go down first.*

From there it was easy. He knew he would never gain muscle the way other hockey players did, so he studied the body. His mother still had medical textbooks from when she went through school, so George lugged them all to his room and in between studying geology and statistics, he learned about the human body.

*There are specific points on the human body where a nerve lies close to its surface and is supported by bone or muscle mass – these are called pressure points. Or, humans retain their balance through the Eustachian tube, which equalizes air pressure in the middle ear with the air pressure in the atmosphere. And, the compression of the trachea can cause asphyxia or stimulate the carotid sinus reflex, causing either or both bradycardia and hypotension.*

The human body is full of weakness, but the human body can be full of strength. After learning the weaknesses, George went to the library and learned the strengths – *lower center of gravity keeps you upright. When fighting, protect your head, face, and neck. A proper fist is made by pressing your fingers together and curling them all down to their base. Continue curling until the tips of your fingers are hidden in your palm. Do not tuck your thumb.*

"Mom," he said when he felt he was ready, "I want to learn hockey."

He was cornered only *once* after this. He left with a bruise on his cheek and his knuckles smarting, but with no pink slip. After that, no one stepped to him, and he took to hockey the same way he took to skating, like it was his life-line. Still he never forgot the box under his bed stuffed with pink, listing out his injuries over the course of three years of bullying.

"He was begging for painkillers," Schlatt says, yanking George back to the present. Back to the file of injuries, to Wilbur's own box overflowing with pink and red. "He was – he was *begging*, Blade. We couldn't figure out why, or– or why he'd think that we wouldn't let him have them, but –"

"This is why." Techno says gravely. He looks sick. George can't even get *there* yet – he still isn't *breathing*.

*Please*, he said once, when he was trying to convince the nurse that he had a headache from the lights instead of the aches that came from being shoved against bricks, *please can I have some Tylenol?*

"George," Sapnap says, noticing, because of course he does. "George, do you want to sit down?"

Techno looks over, eyes bright with concern, and it comes in slow motion, Techno's hand. George, if he were able, would tell him *no, no, don't touch me, not yet, not now*, but he can't, and so Techno reaches, and instinctively, George grabs his wrist and wrenches, twisting.

Around them, their teammates gasp, but Techno, vaguely pained, doesn't move. "George," he says, keeping his eyes on George's. "George, we're not gonna hurt you. You're in Phil's office. We're about to have practice. Phil is on his way, and Wilbur too. You are safe. *Wilbur is safe.*"

George hesitates, very aware of his teammates. The distance between them and him, between him and the door. Wilbur's voice, calling, *Jared, Jared, please, don't –*

He lets go.

Techno pulls back. He rubs at his wrist with his other hand, but before George can speak, he goes, "don't apologize. I should've asked before touching. This is...a lot. I don't blame you for that."

George nods. His cheeks are hot, but none of them mention it. And good, because the quiet lets them hear the rink door open and the melodic sound of Wilbur's voice. They all shuffle over to the doorway to see him walking in with Phil, a gym bag in his hand and a navy hoodie on, looking much more rested than he has in a month.

" – thought it was purple," he's saying, moving easily, like he hasn't been injured, "and apparently it wasn't."

George watches him carefully. No winces, no shuffling, no hunching or curling. His hands don't drift to his sides and his eyes are bright and *present*.

*Wilbur is safe.*

*He's okay, he's okay, he's okay.*

Phil stops when he sees them. "Guys? Any reason you're all in my office?" Then his confused frown deepens. " *Quackity?* Are you – what happened?"

And *this* is when Wilbur goes tense, his limbs bunching close like he's nervous. George feels sick. Just the sight makes him want to tear apart the universe. *Broken collarbone*, his brain says, *sprained wrist, rolled ankle, multiple contusions to the upper arm, dislocation in the shoulder and lacerations to the face.*

George wonders how many of those injuries Wilbur saw coming. He wonders if Wilbur learned to read people the way he did. If he walked into practice the same way that George used to walk into class, looking around and seeing – *there's a line of tension in his back, there's a tick of nerves in hers, if I go any closer, I'll be feeling it instead of just seeing it.*

George wonders what Wilbur reads in *them*, right now. Whatever it is makes him tighten, which in turn, makes George restless.

"Nothing," Techno speaks up. "We're alright. Ready for practice."

Phil is not easily swayed.

"No, you all seem upset," he says. "Did something happen?"

George watches Techno's mouth open and close. The man, unfortunately, can't lie to his coach. He's tried, failed once and never tried again. Techno's gaze bounces over to Wilbur, who is just getting more and more uneasy.

"I think...I think we just need a break," Techno decides on, sounding defeated. Phil's brows furrow with worry.

"Okay," he offers like it's nothing. Practice canceled, just like that. "Okay, no practice today. Is there anything that I can do?"

"Food," Sappnap blurts, and that's all Phil needs to hear. They all pile into separate cars and head to the closest pizza parlor. They slide two tables together, and it would be amusing, the way they try to herd Wilbur to the middle, if the reason wasn't so depressing.

George, still sensitive, sits at the end, just watching them all.

"Sam Panopoulos is the reason we have this, you know," Wilbur rambles, lifting a slice of Hawaiian pizza over to his plate. "He made cheese danishes that mixed up sweet and savory flavors, and so he put pineapple, ham and bacon on a pizza." He takes a bite, through the cheese, he goes, "I think s'really good."

Schlatt, seemingly settled by the sound of Wilbur's voice, raises an eyebrow at the man from over his slice of meat-lover's. "You have no taste, Soot."

Wilbur just shrugs, then passes a slice to Quackity, who's sticking close to his left. To anyone else, he seems clueless to their clinging worry, but George can see the flicker of unease that dances across his face when he thinks they're not looking. He *also* knows that Wilbur clocks the way that George is staring.

Which is why George isn't surprised when Wilbur locks eyes with him, then loudly proclaims that he's going to the bathroom. Quackity stirs, and Schlatt frowns like he's disapproving, but Wilbur disappears before they can say anything. George waits a beat, then stands silently, following.

Wilbur is standing there when George rounds the corner. Anyone else, and they'd be skeptical, demanding of answers, but the cross of Wilbur's arms over his chest is more



uncomfortable than anything else.

"Is everyone alright?" He asks, shuffling slightly, craning his neck to look back at the table, "They're all acting weird. I didn't want to say anything, but – well, I was worried. Did I do something wrong?"

It clicks for George then. Where the difference between the two of them lies. For George, every day he was being hurt, he knew that he didn't deserve it. He knew that people were being cruel and he was their object of obsession for the moment. He knew the hurt wasn't his fault.

Wilbur didn't.

From all that George has seen – the apologizing and the retracting from their space and the nerves that never seem to fade – it's clear that Wilbur thinks that hurt, and any other that he's faced, *is* his fault.

That hurts George more than he can express. So he does the first thing that comes to mind. He steps forward and curls his arms around Wilbur, burying his face into Wilbur's chest.

Wilbur startles, tenses, goes, "Wh– *George?*" But eventually wraps his arms around George delicately. There's a silence, in which George squeezes his eyes shut and just listens to the quick patter of Wilbur's heart. Then, Wilbur says, voice solemn, "you know. Don't you?"

He doesn't expand, doesn't add any extra words. No, *know how they hurt me*, no, *know what they did*, no, *know how I suffered*, because he doesn't need to. He doesn't need to add any other words, because there isn't any true way to sum up the pain that Wilbur went through.

George nods mutely, still clinging on.

"Oh," Wilbur breathes. George expects him to pull away, uncomfortable, but instead, his hold curls tighter, just enough that George can really *feel* it. George feels Wilbur's face tuck into his hair.

"I'm okay," he whispers. "Now." He adds. "I'm okay now. You guys are different, remember? You – you promised."

George swallows. The pride that wells up inside of him is too much to voice all at once. It's much more suited for someone like Techno, or Sapnap. George doesn't do this – not normally. One day he'll be able to tell Wilbur about where he came from. One day, they'll sit side by side, Wilbur with his knees pulled up to his chest and George's eyes on the carpet under them, and George will talk in bits and pieces – an exchange for all that Wilbur's given him. But for now, all he can do is this:

"We promised," George manages, voice like gravel. He's thinking of Wilbur's file, of the file that he's sure Schlatt has, of his own box of hurts. *Never again*, he thinks. *Never*. "I promise."

Wilbur's arms tighten, as if he can hear George's silent vow.

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"They turned against me," Wilbur admits later, when they're all at Sapnap's house, tired from dinner, but too awake to sleep, and wound too tightly to go to their separate homes. They're all just laying around his living room, and Techno's coaxed Wilbur onto the couch. With Sapnap on one side and Tech on the other, he trains his gaze ahead and makes himself speak. "Hypixel."

The word makes the comfortable silence in the room buzz with things unsaid, actions not taken, wishes not granted. *Violent* wishes. But, magically, like they said, they don't leave. They asked Wilbur to be vulnerable and by God, is he trying.

"Turned against you?" Techno prompts. And Wilbur is grateful, because if they let him, he'd let his mouth close under the weight of the memories and never open it again. If they let him, he'd sink under all he's holding and never come back up.

"Yeah," he rasps – his head turns the easy warmth of Sapnap's living room to the oppressive heat under his practice clothes. It turns the bodies of companionship at his side into hands of steel, fists of brick. "Jared wanted to teach me a lesson. He was always teaching me a lesson."

A hand curls over his. Wilbur is too lost in his own head to hold back.

"What was the lesson?" Techno asks, ever gentle.

Wilbur inhales shakily. "Loyalty."

Techno stops asking questions.

Methodically, he goes through it. That night. The way that Jared's grin shined in the rink light as he knocked Wilbur off his feet. The way Walker's laugh echoed off the empty stands. The first boot in his side, the second, the third. The fist that made its way into his curls, the yelp that made them all snort. At one point, blood drained down the back of his throat, and he thought, hysterically, *at least I'm not staining the floors*.

The hand, in the present, tightens and Wilbur blinks. He makes himself stop talking and casts his eyes over the room. They're all staring, expressions despaired. Some, Quackity mainly, have tears in their eyes, while others, Schlatt, has hatred.

"I can stop," he croaks, eyes settling on George, who's ramrod straight as if every word was a blow landed. "If...if it's too much. I can stop."

"Wilbur," Quackity says, his lip wobbling. "You need to talk about this."

"Nobody is going anywhere," Sapnap says, and there it is again: that promise. The pledge to stay. *We are not leaving you. We are not letting you do this on your own.*

"Soot," Schlatt grabs his attention. "If you lived through it, then we can listen to it, alright? Isn't that right?"

Quackity swipes his eyes, and Techno smiles thinly, and Sapnap's hand on his loosens just enough.

When Wilbur looks over at George, the man isn't as tense. There's a heaviness, one that Wilbur thinks he recognizes, one that is deep inside of people who are easy to hurt, who are easy to change, but Wilbur won't probe until George gives him the all-clear. For now, George just gives one deep nod.

Wilbur turns his hand to lace his fingers through Sapnap's. He keeps talking.

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That night, he falls asleep right there on the couch, exhausted by tears and full of warm mugs of hot chocolate. It's three in the morning when he goes down, so the sleep isn't the *most* satisfying, but it's the most restful that he's gotten in a long while, and with his team around him, it feels like a big accomplishment.

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The next trip passes in snips of gold.

Phil is frantic as he checks and rechecks everyone's booked flights – Schlatt was right about Phil freaking out whenever they go anywhere that isn't Canada, but Cuba is a *big* jump up from that, so maybe the worry is worth it. Wilbur remembers being tucked into Schlatt's side as they strolled through the airport. It was cold, but Wilbur couldn't feel it, because he had Schlatt's flannel on for the whole ride. When they get off the bus, Techno offers his hand, and Wilbur gets to curl his fingers into the man's palms safely, as he's led to their shared room.

It's just him and Techno, but the door revolves with their teammates as everyone gets settled. Wilbur would consider the peace disturbed if he wasn't further settled every time one of them poked their head in.

"I got this for you," Quackity says, shoving a, quite frankly, *huge* plush into his arms. "A gift. Please take it. I'll die if you don't, I think."

Wilbur takes it.

He also takes the thermos of tea that Sapnap gets him, and the sweatshirt that Schlatt practically throws at him, and he carefully listens to George when the man reminds Wilbur that he is right down the hall if Wilbur wakes up panicked.

Techno is quiet through all of this, but eventually, clears them all out of the room with an amused smile. When the door finally clicks shut, he turns to Wilbur, who's basically been swaddled in blankets and has this *giant* orca in his arms that he has *no clue* what to do with.

"Comfortable?"

Wilbur nods mutely, cheeks blazing.

"Good." Techno comes closer. "May I?"

Wilbur nods again and Techno sits down at the edge of the bed. He lays his hands down palms up on the comforter and Wilbur reaches into his space, hesitant but comfortable, the plush shifting on his lap. "Wilbur, do you remember a couple of months ago? Back when Phil first gave you his card? Do you remember what I said? I said that I'm never going to treat you with anything but kindness."

Wilbur tears up. Then nods. "I know," he says, voice small. "I know."

"You're safe wherever I am, Wil."

"I know."

"Okay." Techno squeezes his hands once, then pulls away. "I'll be right over there. Wake me if you need anything."

But Wilbur doesn't need to wake him, because Wilbur sleeps soundly through the night.

## End Notes

yeah his name is Jacks with an S bc he fucking sucks what can u do about it shrug

here:

[HQ soundtrack song that reminds me of this fic one](#)

[HQ soundtrack song that that reminds me of this fic two](#)  
[good song. goes crazy](#)

ok bye until October ha.

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